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English Language Competency in English Medium versus Bengali Medium Schools in Tripura

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ABSTRACT

English language competency is an important determinant of students' academic achievement and future educational opportunities. However, differences in the medium of instruction, classroom language practices, and teaching methods may influence students' acquisition of English skills. The present study examines English language competency among Class VII students studying in English-medium and Bengali-medium schools in West Tripura and Gomati districts of Tripura. The study is based on a sample of 635 students drawn from 35 schools, comprising 325 students from English-medium schools and 310 from Bengali-medium schools. Data were analysed descriptively to compare students' performance in grammar, composition and sentence construction, poem comprehension, and passage comprehension, alongside classroom language use and teaching methods. The findings reveal that grammar-translation was the predominant teaching method, accounting for 80.88% of the 68 observed classes, while activity-based and exclusively English-based approaches were comparatively limited. Bengali was the most frequently used classroom language overall, although English was widely used in English-medium schools in West Tripura. Across both districts, English-medium students obtained higher average scores than Bengali-medium students in all four competency areas. The differences were particularly pronounced in poem comprehension and passage comprehension in Gomati district, as well as in composition and sentence construction. These findings highlight disparities in English language competency across the two mediums of instruction and the importance of classroom language practices and pedagogical approaches in understanding these differences. The study recommends greater emphasis on communicative, activity-based, and comprehension-oriented teaching, supported by appropriate multilingual strategies, to improve English language learning. As the analysis is descriptive, the observed differences should not be interpreted as establishing a causal relationship between medium of instruction and competency.

Keywords: English language competency, medium of instruction, grammar-translation method, classroom language practices, multilingual education.

INTRODUCTION

Tripura, one of the smallest states in North-East India, attained full statehood within the Indian Union in 1972. Its linguistic and cultural diversity makes it an important setting for examining English-language education in a multilingual society. Bengali is the predominant language, while Kokborok and several other tribal languages are spoken by different communities. The indigenous population includes Tripuri, Reang (Bru), Jamatia, Noatia, Halam, Chakma, Mog, Kuki and other communities. The Borok-speaking communities constitute a major section of the tribal population, and Kokborok serves as a collective linguistic identity for several related communities (Debbarma, 2009). Tribal communities account for approximately 31.8% of the state's population, according to the demographic information provided for this study. The Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council

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(TTAADC), established in 1982, plays an important role in the administration and educational development of tribal areas.

English occupies an important position in education, administration and wider communication in Tripura. Nevertheless, its educational significance must be understood within a linguistic environment where Bengali predominates and tribal languages remain essential to everyday communication and cultural identity. The state's school system comprises government schools, privately managed institutions and schools administered by religious or cultural organisations. Schools follow different curricula, including those of the Tripura Board of Secondary Education (TBSE), the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE). The medium of instruction varies considerably across the state. Bengali is widely used in schools, whereas Kokborok is employed in many primary schools in tribal areas under the TTAADC. English-medium education has also gained prominence because of increasing parental expectations regarding higher education and employment opportunities. In 2017, the state government initiated the conversion of Bengali-medium schools into English-medium institutions. However, changing the medium of instruction does not automatically ensure English proficiency. Students' learning outcomes may depend on teachers' qualifications, instructional materials, classroom practices, geographical accessibility and opportunities to use English beyond the classroom. In remote areas of Gomati and Dhalai districts, students may have limited exposure to spoken English. Therefore, this study examines the context of English teaching in Tripura, particularly the relationship between multilingualism, medium of instruction and unequal access to effective English-language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on English-language teaching in multilingual societies highlights the interrelationship between language policy, linguistic diversity, educational equality and second-language acquisition. Pattanayak (1981) emphasised multilingualism and mother-tongue education, recognising children's home languages as valuable educational resources. Fishman (1991) examined language maintenance and the reversal of language shift, underscoring the importance of community participation and institutional support in preserving minority languages. Annamalai (2001) discussed the relationship between English, language policy and Indian multilingualism, explaining the growing educational and socioeconomic significance of English alongside the continuing importance of regional languages. Mohanty (2006) highlighted educational inequalities arising from the unequal status of English, dominant regional languages and minority languages, suggesting that tribal learners may experience disadvantages when the instructional language differs from their mother tongue. Similarly, Cummins (2000) explained how linguistic competence and conceptual knowledge acquired in one language can support learning in another, while Baker (2001) examined bilingual education and advocated approaches that develop proficiency in multiple languages. Jhingran (2005) identified language-related barriers in primary education, particularly for children learning through unfamiliar languages. Extending this perspective, Hornberger and Vaish (2009) explored the tensions between multilingual education policies and the increasing demand for English in India, Singapore and South Africa. Panda and Mohanty (2009) further emphasised the significance of cultural backgrounds and linguistic experiences in multilingual education. These researchers suggest that effective English teaching should recognise learners' existing linguistic resources rather than regard mother tongues as barriers to academic achievement. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Tripura, where Bengali, Kokborok and other tribal languages shape students' educational experiences.

Research on language acquisition and multilingual classroom practices also identifies the importance of comprehensible instruction, teacher preparedness and opportunities for meaningful language use. Krashen (1982) argued that second-language acquisition develops through comprehensible input within a supportive learning environment, implying that English-medium instruction alone may not ensure proficiency without adequate teacher guidance and opportunities for interaction. Tsimpli et al. (2019) examined multilingualism and multiliteracy in Indian primary education, highlighting the importance of considering learners' linguistic backgrounds and literacy experiences when investigating educational outcomes. More recently, Sah and Kubota (2022) reviewed English-medium instruction in South Asian school education and discussed translanguaging, whereby learners and teachers draw on multiple languages to facilitate understanding and learning. Their perspective is relevant to classrooms in Tripura, where Bengali or Kokborok may support students' comprehension

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of English-language content. Taken together, these studies indicate that English proficiency is influenced by language policy, socioeconomic circumstances, teachers' instructional practices, learners' home languages and access to educational resources. Although English can expand opportunities for higher education and employment, insufficient support for tribal-language learners may perpetuate educational inequalities. Mother-tongue-based multilingual education, appropriate teaching materials and opportunities for meaningful English interaction may help address these challenges. However, further empirical investigation is needed to establish how these factors influence English proficiency across government and private schools, Bengali- and English-medium institutions, and tribal and non-tribal areas of Tripura. Examining teachers' qualifications, classroom practices, school resources and students' opportunities to practise English would help identify disparities and inform inclusive language-education policies that promote English proficiency while respecting the state's linguistic diversity.

OBJECTIVES

The present study aims to examine English-language teaching and learning in English-medium and Bengali-medium schools in Tripura, with particular reference to students at the elementary stage. It seeks to investigate the language-learning environment in these schools, including instructional methods, teaching techniques and the availability of learning materials; assess the English-language competencies of Class VII students; compare the competency levels of students studying in English-medium and Bengali-medium schools; and analyse the influence of the medium of instruction, school location, and availability of human and non-human educational resources on students' English-language competency.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopts a descriptive and comparative research design to examine English-language teaching and learning among Class VII students in selected schools in Tripura. Gomati and West Tripura districts were selected to represent contrasting educational contexts, with Gomati chosen for its comparatively low literacy rate and West Tripura, which includes the state capital, selected to represent an area with relatively better access to educational infrastructure and human resources. The study covers 635 students from 35 schools, including 325 students from English-medium schools and 310 from Bengali-medium schools across the two districts, to facilitate a comparison of English-language learning outcomes across different instructional settings. Data collection focuses on the language-learning environment, teaching methods and classroom techniques, availability of instructional materials, access to teachers and other educational resources, and students' English-language competencies. Class VII students were selected as the target group to assess competency at the elementary level. The analysis compares English-language competency between students from English-medium and Bengali-medium schools and examines its relationship with the medium of instruction and school location. The collected data may be analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, along with appropriate comparative statistical tests based on the nature and distribution of the competency scores. The findings are expected to identify differences in English-language learning and provide insights for improving teaching practices and educational support in Tripura.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The distribution of schools and respondents selected for the study of English-language teaching and learning in Tripura is presented in Table 1. A total of 635 Class VII students from 35 schools in West Tripura and Gomati districts participated in the study. Of these, 325 students belonged to English-medium schools and 310 to Bengali-medium schools, indicating a relatively balanced representation of the two groups. West Tripura contributed 299 respondents from 16 schools, comprising 153 English-medium and 146 Bengali-medium students. Gomati contributed 336 respondents from 19 schools, including 172 English-medium and 164 Bengali-medium students. This distribution provides a basis for comparing English-language competencies across the two instructional media and districts. Table 2 describes the languages used by teachers during classroom instruction. In West Tripura, English was used in 93.75% of observed English-medium classes, whereas Bengali was used in 87.5% of Bengali-medium classes. In Gomati, English was used in only 44.44% of English-medium classes, while Bengali and Kokborok were also used in 33.33% and 22.22% of these classes, respectively. Across all 68 observed classes, Bengali was the most frequently used instructional language (52.94%), followed by English (38.32%), Kokborok

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(7.35%) and Hindi (1.47%). These findings indicate that classroom language practices vary between districts and that multilingual instruction is particularly evident in Gomati.

Table 1: Distribution of schools and respondents

District	Medium of instruction	Schools visited	No. of respondents
West Tripura	Bengali	8	146
	English	8	153
Gomati	Bengali	10	164
	English	9	172
Total		**35**	**635**

Table 3 illustrates the methods employed by teachers in teaching English. The grammar-translation method was the dominant approach, being used in 55 of the 68 observed classes (80.88%). Activity-based teaching accounted for 13.24% of classes, while teaching exclusively through English was reported in only 5.88%. The grammar-translation method was prevalent in both districts, particularly in Bengali-medium schools, where it was used in 87.5% of classes in West Tripura and 94.44% in Gomati. Activity-based teaching was relatively limited, especially in Bengali-medium schools in Gomati, where it accounted for only 6.66% of classes. Teaching exclusively through English was observed only in English-medium schools. These results suggest that English instruction relied primarily on grammatical explanations and translation rather than interactive activities and sustained communication in English. Although grammar-translation may support the understanding of grammatical structures, the limited use of activity-based approaches may reduce opportunities for students to develop speaking, listening and practical communication skills. The findings therefore highlight the importance of diversifying teaching strategies to promote more active participation and meaningful English-language learning.

Table 2: Language used by the teacher for instruction

District		English	Bengali	Kokborok	Hindi	Total
West Tripura	Eng MS (16 Classes)	15 (93.75)	1 (6.25)	-	-	16 (100)
	Beng MS (16 Classes)	2 (12.5)	14 (87.5)	-	-	16 (100)
Gomati	Eng MS (18 Classes)	8 (44.44)	6 (33.33)	4 (22.22)		18 (100)
	Beng MS (18 Classes)	1 (5.55)	15 (83.33)	1 (5.55)	1 (5.55)	18 (100)
Total		**26 (38.32)**	**36 (52.94)**	**5 (7.35)**	**1(1.47)**	**68** (100)

Figures in parentheses indicates percentages

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Table -3. Methods employed in teaching English

District		Grammar Translation	Activity based teaching	Teach by using only English	Any other
West Tripura	Eng MS (16 Classes)	11 (68.75)	3 (18.75)	2 (12.5)	16 (100)
	Beng MS (16 Classes)	14 (87.5)	2 (12.5)	-	16 (100)
Gomati	Eng MS (18 Classes)	13 (72.22)	3 (16.66)	2 (11.11)	18 (100)
	Beng MS (18 Classes)	17 (94.44)	1 (6.66)	-	18 (100)
Total		55 (80.88)	9 (13.24)	4 (5.88)	68 (100)

Figures in parentheses indicates percentages

Table 4 presents students' average competency in grammar, composition and sentence construction according to their medium of instruction. English-medium students obtained higher scores than Bengali-medium students in both districts. In grammar, English-medium students scored 72.81% in West Tripura and 69.78% in Gomati, compared with 58.03% and 53.08%, respectively, among Bengali-medium students. The corresponding differences were 14.78 and 16.70 percentage points. In composition and sentence construction, English-medium students scored 65.36% in West Tripura and 64.23% in Gomati, whereas Bengali-medium students scored 57.05% and 35.31%, respectively. The disparity was particularly pronounced in Gomati, where the difference reached 28.92 percentage points. These findings suggest that the difference between the two groups was greater in written composition than in grammar, especially in Gomati. The relatively low composition score among Bengali-medium students in this district may indicate difficulties in applying grammatical knowledge to coherent written expression. However, further investigation would be required to determine the extent to which classroom practices, learning resources and students' previous exposure to English contribute to these differences.

Table 4. Average competency in grammar, composition and sentence construction by medium of instruction

District	Competency Area	English Medium (%)	Bengali Medium (%)	District Average (%)
West Tripura	Grammar	72.81	58.03	65.42
	Composition and Sentence Construction	65.36	57.05	61.20
Gomati	Grammar	69.78	53.08	61.43
	Composition and Sentence Construction	64.23	35.31	49.77

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Table 5 examines students' competency in poem and passage comprehension. English-medium students performed better than Bengali-medium students in both districts. In poem comprehension, English-medium students scored 55.05% in West Tripura and 54.90% in Gomati, while Bengali-medium students scored 32.55% and 20.52%, respectively. The differences were 22.50 percentage points in West Tripura and 34.38 percentage points in Gomati. A similar pattern emerged in passage comprehension, where English-medium students achieved scores of 71.04% in West Tripura and 67.20% in Gomati, compared with 52.22% and 34.48% among Bengali-medium students. The corresponding gaps were 18.82 and 32.72 percentage points. Students generally performed better in passage comprehension than in poem comprehension, irrespective of their medium of instruction. This pattern may indicate that interpreting poetry presents greater challenges than understanding prose passages. The substantial differences in Gomati further suggest that Bengali-medium students in this district may require additional support in developing reading comprehension and literary interpretation skills.

Table 5: Average Competency in Poem and Passage Comprehension by Medium of Instruction and District

District	Competency Area	English Medium (%)	Bengali Medium (%)	District Average (%)
West Tripura	Poem Comprehension	55.05	32.55	43.80
	Passage Comprehension	71.04	52.22	61.63
Gomati	Poem Comprehension	54.90	20.52	37.71
	Passage Comprehension	67.20	34.48	50.84

Table 6 consolidates the findings on grammar, written composition, poem comprehension and passage comprehension, confirming the consistent advantage of English-medium students in all four competency areas across both districts. West Tripura generally recorded higher scores than Gomati, particularly among Bengali-medium students in composition and comprehension. English-medium students in West Tripura also achieved slightly higher scores than their counterparts in Gomati across all four areas. The greatest differences between the two instructional groups were observed in Gomati for written composition and poem comprehension, followed by passage comprehension. Taken together, Tables 1–6 indicate that students' English-language competencies vary according to medium of instruction, district and specific language skill. The findings also draw attention to the predominance of grammar-translation teaching and the limited use of activity-based instruction. Strengthening interactive teaching methods, providing appropriate learning materials and creating more opportunities for meaningful English-language practice may help improve students' competencies. Nevertheless, the observed differences should be interpreted as descriptive associations rather than evidence that the medium of instruction alone determines achievement, since teacher preparedness, school resources, home-language backgrounds and students' exposure to English may also influence learning outcomes.

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Table 6: Comparison of overall average scores (in %) of the two districts

District	Grammar		Written Composition		Poem comprehension		Passage comprehension	
	English MS	Bengali MS	English MS	Bengali MS	English MS	Bengali MS	English MS	Bengali MS
West Tripura	72.81	58.03	65.36	57.05	55.05	32.55	71.04	52.22
Gomati	69.78	53.08	64.23	35.31	54.90	20.52	67.20	34.48

DISCUSSION

The present study examined English-language teaching and learning among Class VII students in English-medium and Bengali-medium schools in West Tripura and Gomati districts of Tripura. The findings indicate that students' English-language competencies are associated with their medium of instruction, classroom language practices and teaching methods. English was used more consistently in English-medium classrooms in West Tripura (93.75%) than in Gomati (44.44%). In Gomati, teachers frequently used Bengali and Kokborok alongside English, reflecting the multilingual character of the classroom environment. The authors view multilingualism as an educational resource rather than an obstacle to English-language acquisition. This interpretation is consistent with Pattanayak (1981), who emphasised the importance of mother-tongue education, and Cummins (2000), who explained that knowledge and linguistic competence acquired in one language can support learning in another. Similarly, Mohanty (2006) highlighted the inequalities experienced by learners when the language of instruction does not adequately reflect their linguistic backgrounds. The findings also reveal that the grammar-translation method dominated English teaching, accounting for 80.88% of observed classes, while activity-based teaching constituted only 13.24%. In the authors' view, excessive reliance on translation and grammatical explanations may limit students' opportunities to practise English through meaningful communication. This observation corresponds with Krashen's (1982) emphasis on comprehensible input and supportive learning environments for second-language acquisition. The authors therefore consider a balanced pedagogical approach essential, combining explicit grammar instruction with interactive activities, reading exercises, group discussions and opportunities for spoken and written expression. The use of Bengali and Kokborok to clarify difficult concepts may facilitate understanding, provided that classroom practices gradually encourage greater confidence and proficiency in English.

The competency results demonstrate consistent differences between English-medium and Bengali-medium students across grammar, written composition, poem comprehension and passage comprehension. English-medium students achieved higher grammar scores in West Tripura (72.81%) and Gomati (69.78%) than Bengali-medium students, whose respective scores were 58.03% and 53.08%. The disparity was particularly pronounced in Gomati for written composition, where English-medium students scored 64.23%, compared with 35.31% among Bengali-medium students. Similarly, Bengali-medium students in Gomati recorded only 20.52% in poem comprehension and 34.48% in passage comprehension, compared with 54.90% and 67.20%, respectively, among English-medium students. In the authors' view, these differences may reflect unequal exposure to English, variations in instructional practices and differences in access to effective learning resources. The relatively higher scores of Bengali-medium students in West Tripura than their counterparts in Gomati also suggest that the medium of instruction alone may not fully explain students' performance. This interpretation is consistent with Jhingran (2005), who discussed language-related barriers in primary education, and Baker (2001), whose work emphasised the importance of supportive bilingual educational approaches. Furthermore, the perspectives of Hornberger and Vaish (2009) and Sah and Kubota (2022) support the consideration of multilingual classroom practices in promoting learning. The authors recommend strengthening teacher training, introducing activity-

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based and learner-centred teaching methods, improving access to appropriate English-language materials and providing additional support for students experiencing difficulties in composition and comprehension. Particular attention should be given to Bengali-medium schools in Gomati, where the observed competency gaps were substantial. However, because the present findings are descriptive, they do not establish a causal relationship between medium of instruction and achievement. Further research incorporating students' socioeconomic backgrounds, teachers' qualifications, school infrastructure and exposure to English would help explain the observed differences and support the development of equitable English-language education in Tripura.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The present study examined English-language teaching and learning among 635 Class VII students from 35 English-medium and Bengali-medium schools in West Tripura and Gomati districts of Tripura. The findings reveal considerable differences in English-language competency according to medium of instruction, district and specific language skills. English-medium students consistently achieved higher average scores than Bengali-medium students in grammar, written composition, poem comprehension and passage comprehension. The disparities were particularly pronounced in Gomati, where Bengali-medium students recorded lower scores in written composition (35.31%), poem comprehension (20.52%) and passage comprehension (34.48%). The study also found that the grammar-translation method predominated in English teaching, accounting for 80.88% of observed classes, while activity-based teaching was comparatively limited. Furthermore, classroom language practices varied between districts, with teachers in Gomati frequently using Bengali and Kokborok alongside English. These findings suggest that English-language proficiency depends not only on the designated medium of instruction but also on teaching methods, classroom language practices, exposure to English and the availability of educational resources. The authors conclude that improving English-language education requires greater attention to students' linguistic backgrounds, learning environments and opportunities to develop practical communication skills. However, the observed differences are descriptive and do not establish that the medium of instruction alone determines students' achievement.

The findings have important implications for educational policy, teacher development and classroom practice in Tripura. First, teachers should be encouraged to adopt learner-centred and activity-based approaches, including storytelling, group discussions, language games, creative writing and interactive reading exercises, to improve students' communication and comprehension skills. Second, regular professional development should strengthen teachers' competence in multilingual pedagogy and the effective teaching of English grammar, composition and literary texts. Third, Bengali and Kokborok should be used strategically to clarify difficult concepts and support comprehension while progressively increasing students' opportunities to communicate in English. Fourth, additional academic support, appropriate textbooks, reading materials, language-learning facilities and remedial programmes should be prioritised for Bengali-medium schools, particularly in Gomati, where substantial competency gaps were observed. Educational authorities should also ensure equitable access to qualified English teachers and learning resources across districts. At the policy level, English-language development should be integrated with mother-tongue-based multilingual education so that the promotion of English does not undermine students' linguistic and cultural identities. Finally, further research should investigate the influence of teachers' qualifications, socioeconomic conditions, school infrastructure, home-language backgrounds and extracurricular exposure to English on learning outcomes. Such evidence would help develop context-sensitive educational interventions that improve English proficiency, reduce disparities between schools and promote more inclusive and equitable English-language education throughout Tripura.

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