



Identifying the Challenges of Learning English at the Secondary Level: A Study with Special Reference to Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal

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Abstract

English has been an important part of the Indian education system for many years and is still a key language for higher education, jobs, professional work, science, technology, and moving up in society. However, at the secondary level, just teaching English in school does not always help students become good at using it in real life. This is especially true in rural and semi-rural areas, where students may not get much practice with English outside of class. They often face problems like language differences, fear of speaking, teaching methods that don't work well, lack of money and resources, and poor school facilities. This study looks at the main difficulties students face when learning English at the secondary level, with a focus on Paschim Medinipur in West Bengal. The study looks at how English is taught in India as a whole and considers several factors that affect learning, like how students' first language affects English, not having enough vocabulary, grammar challenges, not enough chances to speak and listen, teaching that focuses too much on exams, fear of using English, lack of confidence, family background, access to learning tools, and not enough exposure to English. Recent studies in West Bengal have shown that English language fear is linked to lower language skills and that students in rural areas feel more anxious about learning English. Other studies have found that things like the culture around a student, where they live, fear in class, limitations in how teachers teach, and not enough practice with real English conversations are important factors in learning English. This study uses both written and spoken methods to collect data from secondary students and English teachers in selected schools in Paschim Medinipur. It argues that the problems in learning English are not just because of the students themselves but come from the interaction of many factors like students' traits, school conditions, teaching methods, family environments, and the bigger language environment. The study concludes that better English learning needs a change from teaching that focuses only on exams and memorizing to teaching that is more about using the language, is student-centered, and gives more support.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Secondary Education, Paschim Medinipur, English as a Second Language, Language Anxiety, Mother-Tongue Influence, Rural Education, Communicative Competence, West Bengal.

1. Introduction

Language is a key tool that helps people learn, connect with others, share culture, and take part in work.



In places where many languages are spoken, like India, the way people learn language is closely linked to how much education they get and how far they can go in life. English has a special place in this. Even though most people in India don't speak English at home, it plays a big role in higher learning, government, science, technology, work, and communication. Because of this, many students see learning English not just as something they need for school, but also as a helpful tool for education and social life.

But just because English is important doesn't mean every student has the same chance to learn it. Students come into English classes with very different experiences. Some may have grown up hearing English on TV, in books, or through online media, while others only see it in school. Their families may support their learning in different ways, and they may have access to different resources, study habits, and feelings about learning. All of these factors affect how well they learn English.

The secondary school years are especially important.

During this time, students build on what they learned earlier and improve skills like reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary. English becomes even more important for their future studies. Yet, many students finish secondary school without feeling confident using English to communicate well.

This issue isn't just in one place or one kind of school.

Research in West Bengal has shown that how anxious students feel about English is tied to how well they do in the language. A study by Sen and Panda in 2025, looking at 400 secondary students, found that students with higher anxiety had lower English skills. They also noticed that students from rural areas were more anxious than those from cities. Another study by Chakraborty and Naskar, published in December 2025, showed similar differences, with rural students feeling more anxious and achieving less in English.

These results show that learning English isn't just about how long students have studied it.

What really matters is how they are exposed to the language, how well they are taught, how much chance they have to use it meaningfully, how the classroom feels emotionally, and what support they have.

This study looks at these issues in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal.

The goal is not to say that students in this area are bad at learning English, but to explore the kinds of challenges they face—like the system, how teaching is done, the language used, and the mental aspects of learning English.

2. Background of the Study

The teaching of English in India has a long and complicated history.

English was first linked closely with colonial rule and education for the wealthy, but after India became independent, it started to play a bigger role in education and communication. Today, English is used alongside many Indian languages in a country where people speak a variety of languages.

In West Bengal, Bengali is the main language people use in daily life for most of the population.



English, on the other hand, is mainly found in formal education settings. For many students who learn in Bengali-medium schools, English is a second language they have to learn in an environment where Bengali is spoken a lot.

It's important to understand the difference between knowing about English and being able to use it.

A student might remember grammar rules, definitions, and vocabulary from textbooks but still struggle to understand spoken English or communicate on their own. The exam system can sometimes make this worse because students and teachers focus on the parts of English that are tested directly.

Recent studies show that this issue needs more attention.

A study on English teaching in Bengali-medium secondary schools in West Bengal found that students often fear speaking English, are influenced by their mother tongue, lack confidence, face limited curriculum options, and don't get enough practice. The study also suggested that tools like technology, group learning, storytelling, language labs, and visual materials can help.

Research on English writing skills among Bengali-medium secondary students has also looked at how writing performance connects to factors like where a student lives and whether they are the first in their family to learn English.

This shows that English learning should be looked at in the context of students' overall social and living conditions.

The situation in Paschim Medinipur makes this study especially important.

The district has a mix of rural, semi-urban, and urban education environments, along with communities that vary in social and economic backgrounds. Because of this, the learning experiences of students in the district are not the same everywhere.

3. The Problem of English Learning at the Secondary Level

The issue of learning English at the secondary school level has many connected parts.

On the language side, students often struggle with words, grammar, how to speak clearly, understanding texts, writing well, and listening carefully. On the mental or emotional side, feelings like fear, nervousness, embarrassment, lack of confidence, and a fear of making mistakes can stop students from taking part in class. In terms of teaching, lessons that are mostly teacher-led, not enough practice in real-life language use, pressure from exams, and not enough teaching tools or materials can limit how much students can use the language in meaningful ways.

This problem is made worse by the difference between rural and urban schools.

Students in rural areas may not have as many chances to use English outside of school, and they might not have as much access to private lessons, libraries, digital tools, or places where English is spoken. It's not true that all rural students are at a disadvantage or that all urban students are good at English. Instead, the study looks into whether the kind of learning environment a student is in affects how much they can develop their English skills.

It's also important to think about the mother tongue, which is Bengali.



Bengali helps students with their thinking and learning in general, but the differences between Bengali and English can cause problems when students try to use patterns from one language in another. This transfer can affect how they pronounce words, the order of words in a sentence, the use of articles and prepositions, how they form tenses, and how they build sentences.

4. Statement of the Problem

The present study focuses on the following main question:

Why do many students at the secondary level still face serious challenges in learning and using English even after being taught the language for several years?

This issue is examined in the context of Paschim Medinipur district.

The study looks at the interaction between various factors such as language, teaching methods, psychology, socio-economic conditions, and the environment.

The research does not assume that one single reason is behind poor English learning.

Instead, it views the process of learning a language as something complex, where what happens in the classroom interacts with family background, student motivation, exposure to the language, availability of educational resources, and social expectations.

5. Need and Significance of the Study

The need for this study comes from the increasing importance of English in higher education and in jobs, along with the ongoing struggles many students face in becoming proficient in the language.

A previous study in West Bengal showed that language anxiety is linked to lower English proficiency, and that students from rural areas may feel more anxiety than those from urban areas. Another recent study found that classroom anxiety is strongly connected to English performance among secondary students. These findings highlight the importance of looking at psychological factors along with traditional academic factors.

This research is important for several reasons.

First, it focuses specifically on Paschim Medinipur and not the whole of West Bengal as a single educational area. Second, it looks at multiple factors at the same time rather than just grammar or exam results. Third, it pays attention to the real learning environment of students. Fourth, it includes the views of both teachers and students. Finally, it provides evidence that is specific to the local context, which can help teachers, school leaders, curriculum planners, and education policymakers.

6. Objectives of the Study

The main goal of this study is to find out and understand the major problems that secondary students face while learning English in Paschim Medinipur district.

More specifically, the study will look at the difficulties students have in listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.



It will also check how the mother tongue and the language at home affect learning. It will analyze the role of motivation, anxiety, and confidence in learning English. The study will examine how a student's family background and economic situation influence English learning. It will look into the availability of resources for learning English. It will also study what teachers think about the difficulties students face. Finally, the study will suggest ways teachers can improve English learning for secondary students.

7. Research Questions

The study is based on the following questions:

1. What are the main difficulties that secondary students face in learning English in Paschim Medinipur?
2. Which language skills are the hardest for learners?
3. What are the common grammar and vocabulary issues faced by students?
4. How does the language environment at home and in the community affect English learning?
5. To what extent does not having much exposure to English outside of school affect learners?
6. How do feelings of anxiety, confidence, and motivation affect English learning?
7. What role do family and socio-economic factors play in learning English?
8. What teaching methods are most commonly used in classrooms?
9. What challenges do English teachers face in their work?
10. What steps can be taken to improve English learning at the secondary level?

8. Review of Related Literature

The existing literature shows that learning English is affected by many different factors, including things like how the brain works, language skills, emotions, social interactions, and the education system.

Sen and Panda's 2025 study is especially important because they looked at 400 secondary students from West Bengal.

They used standard tests to measure English-language anxiety and how good students are at English. Their results showed a clear link: lower English skills were connected with higher anxiety. They also found that students from rural areas felt more anxious. This is important because it shows that learning problems may not always be due to a lack of ability. A student might be able to learn English but still struggle because anxiety stops them from trying and practicing.

Chakraborty and Naskar's 2025 study supports this.

They studied second-language anxiety and English grades among 300 secondary students. Their findings showed that students from rural areas had more classroom anxiety, while those from urban areas had better English results. They also found a strong link between classroom anxiety and lower English performance.

Another important factor is the socio-cultural setting.

Research on Bengali-medium secondary students in West Bengal has looked at whether social and cultural influences affect English skills, especially reading and writing. This study included



students from rural and urban schools in Class X and used methods like descriptive statistics, correlation, and t-tests to analyze the data.

Recent studies have also focused more on English writing skills.

Ghosh, Mahato, and Sen's 2026 study looked at writing abilities among secondary students in Bengali-medium schools. They used cluster analysis and included factors like location and whether students were first-generation learners. This is valuable because writing isn't just about grammar—it also shows vocabulary, structure, reading experience, and how much students get to use the language in real situations.

Teacher-related challenges are also very important.

A recent study of Bengali-medium schools in West Bengal found that teachers face problems like students being afraid to speak English, influence from their home language, lack of confidence, limited curriculum, and not enough opportunities to use English. They suggested using more technology, group learning, storytelling, language labs, and visual tools to help.

Research in the Medinipur region is also relevant.

A recent study of secondary schools in Contai, Purba Medinipur, pointed out several challenges, including limited vocabulary, weak grammar skills, lack of confidence, limited learning outside the classroom, not enough teacher training, large classes, and not enough teaching materials. Even though Purba Medinipur is a different area from Paschim Medinipur, the results give useful information about the region.

The literature shows several common problems but also points out a gap.

Most current studies look at West Bengal as a whole or focus on specific psychological factors or another district. There is a need for a more detailed and comprehensive study that specifically looks at the English-learning environment for secondary students in Paschim Medinipur.

9. Research Gap

The review shows that a lot of research has been done on English education in West Bengal.

However, there are three main areas that still need more attention.

First, there isn't much research that combines different factors like language, psychology, teaching methods, socio-economic conditions, and infrastructure in a single study at the district level.

Second, most studies focus on one thing at a time, such as language skills, anxiety, performance, or teaching challenges.

If we look at how these factors work together, we might get a better understanding.

Third, findings from other districts can't be automatically applied to Paschim Medinipur.

The educational situation here is influenced by local geography, school facilities, socio-economic conditions, language habits, and access to resources.

Because of this, the current study aims to provide a specific view of Paschim Medinipur.

10. Research Methodology

10.1 Research Design



A descriptive survey combined with some qualitative research is suitable for this study.

Using both numerical data and personal experiences can give a clearer picture.

10.2 Population

The study will include students at the secondary level in selected schools in Paschim Medinipur, along with English teachers who teach at that level.

10.3 Sample

The sample should cover different areas and types of schools in the district.

Both rural and urban or semi-urban schools should be included to allow for meaningful comparisons.

The exact number of participants will be decided after the sampling process is complete.

10.4 Research Instruments

A structured student questionnaire will be used to gather information about their background, English exposure, learning habits, motivation, anxiety, classroom involvement, language challenges, family support, and access to resources.

An English proficiency test will also be used to assess grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing skills.

A teacher interview schedule will help collect details about their teaching methods, common mistakes made by students, teaching tools available, class sizes, ways of assessing students, teacher training, and any issues faced by the school.

Classroom observations will help understand how English is actually used in lessons, how teachers speak, how students participate, how questions are asked, how group work is done, and how teaching tools are used.

11. Major Challenges in Learning English

11.1 Vocabulary Deficiency

Vocabulary is a key part of learning a language.

Students with limited vocabulary may understand grammar rules but struggle to read or express their thoughts clearly. Not having enough words can lead to a cycle where students avoid reading because it's tough, which keeps their vocabulary from growing.

In areas with less access to resources, this problem can be worse when English reading is only done through textbooks.

Students who don't have access to storybooks, newspapers, magazines, or online English materials don't get much chance to see words in real situations.

Therefore, teaching vocabulary should go beyond just memorizing words.

Students need to see and use words again and again through reading, listening, speaking, writing, and other activities.

11.2 Grammatical Difficulties

Grammar is still an important part of English learning in high school.

Students often struggle with tenses, articles, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary verbs, sentence structure, active and passive voice, and reported speech.



The problem comes when grammar is taught just as a bunch of rules to remember, not as a tool for communication.

Students might know the correct grammar but can't use it naturally.

The real issue is not whether grammar should be taught, but how it should be connected with real language use.

11.3 Reading Difficulties

Reading needs vocabulary, grammar knowledge, the ability to infer, background knowledge, and concentration.

Students who rarely read English beyond textbooks may find it hard to understand new passages. Reading for exams can push students to look for answers instead of learning to understand on their own.

A better reading culture can include graded readers, short stories, newspapers, biographies, simple informational texts, and age-appropriate digital resources.

11.4 Writing Difficulties

Writing is a tough skill because it requires control of vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, organization, coherence, and content.

Students may know individual words and grammar rules but can't put them together into connected paragraphs.

Writing lessons should include steps like planning, writing drafts, peer review, revising, and teacher feedback, not just correcting mistakes.

11.5 Speaking Difficulties

Speaking is the most obvious area of difficulty because it requires students to use language in real time.

Students might be shy because they're afraid of making grammar mistakes or getting laughed at. This can make the classroom a place where students aren't comfortable trying out their spoken English.

Recent studies from West Bengal show that fear of speaking, low confidence, and not enough practice are major issues.

11.6 Listening Difficulties

Listening is often overlooked in exam-focused education.

Students spend a lot of time reading and writing but not much time on natural spoken English.

Listening activities should be a regular part of learning.

Using short recordings, conversations, stories, announcements, interviews, and age-appropriate audio resources can slowly improve listening skills.

11.7 Mother-Tongue Influence

Using Bengali as the main language of daily life can influence how students speak English.

This influence isn't bad on its own. Being multilingual is an advantage. However, comparing Bengali and English can help students understand differences and avoid mistakes.

11.8 Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is a key part of this study.



Recent research from West Bengal shows that anxiety and English ability are linked in a negative way.

Students may feel anxious when asked to read aloud, answer questions, join conversations, or speak in front of classmates.

If these negative experiences repeat, students may stop participating altogether.

The right approach is not to avoid challenges, but to create supportive environments where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process.

11.9 Limited Exposure to English

Learning a language needs exposure and meaningful practice.

When English is only taught in classrooms, students don't get much chance to use it automatically. Creating English clubs, reading corners, peer conversations, storytelling, debates, role-plays, and digital learning spaces can help bring English into students' lives beyond the textbook.

11.10 Examination-Oriented Learning

An exam-based system influences how lessons are taught.

When grades are the main goal, teachers and students might focus on memorizing, model answers, grammar drills, and predictable question types.

These practices can help students pass exams but don't always help them become good communicators.

11.11 Family and Socio-Economic Background

The family environment can affect English learning through parents' education, availability of books, access to digital tools, private tutoring, and attitudes towards English.

This issue should be handled carefully.

Socio-economic challenges don't mean a lack of interest or ability.

One thing to consider is that unequal access to resources can lead to unequal chances for students to practice.

11.12 Availability of Teaching Resources

Schools that don't have enough access to libraries, audio-visual tools, language labs, computers, or internet may struggle to offer a wide range of English learning activities.

Therefore, the availability of resources should be part of the school's overall environment.

12. Discussion

The issues mentioned earlier are not separate problems.

They are connected and affect each other.

A student with a small vocabulary might be shy to speak.

If they keep hesitating, they might feel anxious. Anxiety can make them less likely to participate.

Less participation means less practice, which can make it harder to become good at English. The same thing happens with limited access to English materials. This can slow down vocabulary growth, which affects reading and writing, and can also lower exam results and confidence.

This pattern also happens in schools.



Big classes mean fewer chances for students to practice speaking one-on-one. Pressure from exams can make teachers avoid activities that involve communication. Not enough teaching tools can limit listening and using multimedia. Teachers in these situations might choose methods that are easier to use with many students.

So, the problem is not just about students or teachers failing.

It's about a system where different factors are connected and influence each other.

13. Educational Implications

The results and existing research show that English teaching at the secondary level needs to change slowly and steadily.

English lessons should be more about speaking and using the language, but not forget about grammar.

Grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, listening, and speaking should work together, not be taught separately.

Schools should create safe spaces for students to speak.

Working in pairs or small groups can help students practice English without the stress of speaking in front of the whole class.

Reading should not just be from textbooks.

Even a small reading area with books that are suitable for their level can give students more exposure to English.

Technology can help in the classroom if the school has the right facilities.

Listening can improve with audio materials, and digital stories and educational videos can give more exposure to spoken English.

Teachers also need better training and support.

Recent studies on schools that teach in Bengali specifically suggest changes in how teachers teach, using more technology and more activities that involve communication.

14. Conclusion

Learning English at the secondary level is affected by many different factors, including language, mind, teaching methods, social and economic conditions, and the environment.

So, the problems students in Paschim Medinipur face should not just be blamed on them not trying hard enough or not being smart enough.

The research in this paper shows that things like fear of speaking English, differences between rural and urban areas, cultural influences, the use of the mother tongue, not enough exposure to English, and how classes are taught can all make learning English harder.

Looking into this at the district level is important because education works better when it fits the real situations in a place.

To improve English learning in a lasting way, we need classrooms that support students, real practice opportunities, enough learning materials, well-trained teachers, and chances for students to use English without being afraid of making mistakes.



Paschim Medinipur is a good place to study not just whether students learn English, but also under what conditions they learn it, what stops them from learning it well, and what changes in education can make learning English easier and more useful for them.

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