

From Policy to Practice: Social Constraints on English Language Learning In Rural Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

Although English has an institutional status as a second language in India, many rural learners encounter it in conditions similar to a foreign language setting. This study examines the gap between policy and classroom practice in English education in rural colleges of Andhra Pradesh from a sociolinguistic perspective. While cognitive ability plays a role in second language learning, sociolinguistic factors such as unsupportive home environments, low parental education, limited exposure to English, and the absence of role models create serious obstacles for rural learners. This article discusses the everyday social challenges that affect English learning in rural contexts and suggests ways to design classroom activities suited to these realities.

Keywords: Rural English education, Policy–practice gap, Sociolinguistic perspective, ESL–EFL mismatch, Language learning barriers, Gender and language, English language teaching in India

Introduction

Language learning is often seen as a cognitive process, but in rural contexts, social factors play a crucial role. While Chomsky's (1965) Language Acquisition Device suggests innate language-learning capacity, rural learners lag behind urban peers largely due to socially induced barriers rather than cognitive limitations. Language acquisition is fundamentally a social process, requiring interaction within communities that actively use the language (Franksmith, 1990). In rural areas, such English-speaking environments are rare, and schools provide minimal opportunities for real-time communication. The present article seeks to analyse how social environment, institutional practices, gender norms, and teacher preparedness influence learners' engagement with English and proposes context-sensitive strategies for improving rural ESL instruction.

Empirical Evidence of Rural–Urban Gaps in English Learning (Telugu Context)

- ASER 2023 reports that nearly 43% of rural adolescents (14–18 years) in India are unable to read simple English sentences. Similar learning gaps are observed in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.
- A joint APSICHE–British Council survey of 10,000 undergraduate students in Andhra Pradesh found that 65% had only basic or below-basic English proficiency, while just 15% reached an intermediate level and only 5% showed advanced skills. Students from rural areas, especially in the Rayalaseema region (except Chittoor district), performed much poorer than urban students, clearly showing a strong rural–urban disparity in LSRW skills (British Council, 2013).
- A large survey of 3,012 rural students in Telangana shows that rural learners face serious difficulties in English proficiency and communication skills, which affect their academic progress and job readiness.
- Research on educational attainment indicates that Andhra Pradesh has one of the widest rural–urban literacy gaps in India, which also reflects disparities in English language learning and achievement.

Socio-Linguistic Realities and the Learner’s Context

The ESL landscape in rural areas faces many challenges, among which cognitive issues receive the main focus. Although psychological and emotional barriers are mentioned in theory, sociolinguistic factors in English learning are largely ignored in practice. In reality, social issues create emotional blocks that lead to cognitive difficulties.

ESL or EFL? Theory and Reality

Kachru’s (1985) Three Circles Model explains how English is used around the world. According to this model, countries like the UK and the USA belong to the *Inner Circle*, where English is the native language. Countries such as India and Nigeria fall under the *Outer Circle*, where English has an official and institutional role. Nations like China and Japan are placed in the *Expanding Circle*, where English is learned as a foreign language (cited in Rajadurai, 2005). This suggests that English functions as a second language for most Indians. However, this classification does not match the reality of rural India.

In rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, English exists more on paper than in everyday use. Although English is listed as the medium of instruction, teachers often explain lessons in Telugu. Even routine college communication usually takes place in the mother tongue.

This situation is very different from true ESL contexts, such as in the United States, where learners hear and use English both inside and outside the classroom. Rural Indian students, many of whom are first-generation learners, rarely encounter English in their

daily lives. They are not surrounded by English through media, social interaction, or institutional practice.

As a result, rural India does not fully fit into the ESL category of the Outer Circle, nor does it follow the planned foreign-language learning of the Expanding Circle. This gap shows a clear difference between how English is classified in theory and how it is actually experienced by learners in rural settings. The mismatch between policy classification and lived experience creates pedagogical confusion in rural classrooms.

Early Exposure and Teacher Competency

Many language learning theories agree that the best time to learn a new language is before puberty. The Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) explains that children learn languages more easily because their brains are more flexible. As people grow older, this flexibility reduces, making language learning harder. Children also use procedural memory (Ullman, 2001), which helps them quickly pick up grammar, sounds, and sentence patterns—abilities that weaken in adulthood.

In rural areas, students have little or no exposure to English during their early schooling. Although some schools are called “English-medium,” classroom teaching is mostly done in Telugu. Students rarely hear or use English, and there are very few English-speaking role models.

Teacher preparation is another major issue in Andhra Pradesh. Primary school teachers are trained in DIETs to teach all subjects, but their English training is often limited and focuses more on theory than on how languages are actually learned. As a result, English is usually taught through explanation and memorization instead of meaningful practice. Poor pay and lack of proper qualifications further affect teaching quality in rural private schools.

The problem even continues at higher levels of education. Many college lecturers are not trained in language teaching methods. While they may have good knowledge of English literature, they often lack skills such as lesson planning, student assessment, and ongoing evaluation. This gap between language knowledge and teaching skill makes effective English learning difficult for rural students.

Gendered and Social Barriers to Learning English

Students in rural Telugu-speaking areas face several social and cultural barriers while learning English. One major problem is the lack of support at home. Most students are first-generation learners and their parents have little or no knowledge of English. Since English is not spoken at home, parents cannot help their children with English skill improvement. Because English is often seen as a language of the elite, students feel emotionally distant from it and lose interest in learning

Another strong barrier is the fear of ridicule. Students who try to speak English are often mocked by their peers and sometimes even corrected harshly by teachers which increases language anxiety and discourages oral participation (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Many learners believe that English must be spoken perfectly, so they remain silent to avoid embarrassment. Outside the classroom, speaking English is often considered “showing off,” which further discourages practice. This fear creates emotional blocks and prevents students from gaining confidence.

Gender also plays an important role in limiting English learning. In many villages of Andhra Pradesh or Telangana girls are brought up to be quiet and obedient, which reduces their classroom participation. Fear of being judged or criticized stops them from speaking in English. Social expectations discourage girls from taking risks in learning. Early marriage, limited family encouragement, and low expectations from the community further restrict their progress. As Jeffery and Jeffery (2005) point out, such barriers are deeply rooted in socio-cultural structures that often undervalue girls’ education in rural South Asian contexts.

Finally, English has very little use in daily life in rural settings. Local languages are used everywhere—at home, in markets, and even in classrooms. Since students do not need English for everyday communication, they see no immediate purpose in learning it. English remains exam-oriented rather than practical. (Coleman, 2010) observes that when English is not connected to daily social and functional needs, learners fail to understand its importance.

Attendance and Motivation in Rural Colleges: Field Realities

Colleges located in semi-urban and rural areas generally face low admissions and poor classroom attendance. In government colleges of Andhra Pradesh, on average, only 30% to 60% of students attend classes regularly, which means absenteeism is close to 40%. (These figures are based on institutional records and classroom observation across selected colleges).

According to a UNESCO report (2015), economic hardship and family responsibilities often prevent students in rural and semi-urban areas from continuing their education. In the colleges of Andhra Pradesh, several adult learners return to college after long gaps, not because a degree is necessary for employment, but because it carries social value. For such students, education is more about social recognition than academic or professional advancement.

Many students also report boredom and a lack of interest in classroom teaching, indicating a gap between the curriculum, teaching methods, and student expectations. Others, particularly those from economically weaker backgrounds, are forced to miss

classes due to domestic responsibilities. Some students take care of younger siblings, manage household duties, or support elderly family members. In several cases, students become the primary earners for their families due to illness, disability, or the loss of a parent.

Gender-related pressures further complicate the situation. Many female students live with constant uncertainty about early marriage, which discourages long-term commitment to education. In rural settings, it is common for capable and motivated girls to discontinue their studies midway due to family decisions. Parents often explain their inability to send their children to college by stating that household and work responsibilities leave no one else to manage the home.

In addition, many students—both male and female—work part-time in malls, mobile shops, hospitals, petrol stations, and similar workplaces to support their families. While these responsibilities are genuine, they significantly reduce the time and energy available for academic participation.

From an administrative perspective, enforcing strict attendance rules may prevent such students from appearing for examinations or progressing to higher classes. However, this may also reduce admissions and invite scrutiny from higher authorities. Therefore, poor attendance and low motivation cannot be understood or addressed from a single perspective; they represent a complex, interconnected problem rooted in students' lived realities.

English as the Language of the Elite

In many rural villages, English is still viewed as the language of the elite. Although scholars support the idea of Indian Englishes, the importance and authority of British English remain deeply rooted in people's minds. As a result, any form of English that does not follow "standard" norms is often mocked or rejected.

This attitude is clearly reflected in Nissim Ezekiel's satirical poem "*Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.*". The poem humorously shows how Indian speakers of English are ridiculed for their non-native use of the language. The lines:

"You are allknowing, friends,
Whatsweetnessis in Miss Pushpa.
I don't mean onlyexternalsweetness
butinternalsweetness.
Miss Pushpaissmiling and smiling
evenfor no reasonbutsimplybecause
sheisfeeling."
(Ezekiel, 1972)

show how Miss Pushpa's English is laughed at because it does not follow strict grammatical rules. Even though the expressions are awkward and the sentence structure is unusual, the meaning is still clearly communicated.

This example shows an important truth about language learning: communication matters more than perfect correctness. Language should not be judged only as right or wrong. The act of speaking itself is essential for language learning, and this principle should guide English teaching in India. Ezekiel's satire indirectly questions rigid norms of correctness and supports the acceptance of intelligible Indian Englishes in educational contexts.

The poem also points to another serious issue. Miss Pushpa, who is an English teacher, herself struggles with the language. This reflects a common situation in rural areas, where teachers often lack strong proficiency in English. As a result, students do not receive the kind of language exposure and guidance they need, which further limits effective English learning in rural contexts.

Enhancing English Learning in Rural Contexts: The Four Ps Model

Based on the socio-linguistic challenges discussed above, the following principles are suggested for rural ESL classrooms.

1. Changing Learner Perception

In rural India, English proficiency is often mistaken as a sign of intelligence. Research shows that language learning depends mainly on exposure, need, and a supportive environment, not on natural ability. Immigrant children in multilingual cities learn several languages because they are surrounded by them, not because they are more intelligent (Hoff, 2006). Even experienced language learners like Steve Kaufmann state that exposure and interest, not intelligence, shaped their success (Kaufmann, 2017). Therefore, English learning should be understood as a result of environment and relevance rather than intellectual superiority.

2. Natural Language Progression

Teaching of ESL should follow the natural order of language acquisition. Classrooms should give priority to listening and speaking before reading and writing. Learners need regular exposure to spoken English and opportunities to speak without fear.

Grammar should not dominate early instruction. Instead, teachers should focus on meaningful communication in a low-stress environment. As Krashen's theories explain, language is acquired through natural input and reduced anxiety, not through memorizing rules (Kaufmann [@lingosteve], 2013).

Institutions should redesign classroom practices to respect this progression, as ignoring it weakens the entire ESL learning process.

3. Experiential Language Preference

Teachers should give preference to experiential and activity-based learning. English lessons should start with real-life tasks, hands-on activities, and familiar situations instead of abstract explanations. According to Edgar Dale's Cone of Experiences, such concrete learning supports better understanding and retention (Dale, 1946). Krashen (1982) also stresses the value of using immediate, meaningful classroom experiences to support natural language acquisition.

4. Skill - Oriented Practice

ESL classroom practice should involve more than thinking and memorising. Bloom's Taxonomy shows that effective learning engages not only the cognitive domain but also the affective and psychomotor domains (Bloom et al., 1956). ESL teaching should therefore include emotional involvement, interaction, and performance-based activities.

English needs to be treated as a skill to be practiced, not just a subject to be studied. Using familiar, real-life activities helps learners practice language naturally and with confidence. Simple, low-cost tasks that reflect students' everyday experiences can gradually build both language ability and motivation.

Conclusion

English acquisition in rural India is shaped more by social realities than cognitive ability. Limited exposure, fear of ridicule, gender norms, and lack of practical usage create significant barriers for learners. Effective ESL instruction in such contexts requires recognizing language as a social practice, providing meaningful, experiential learning and creating low-stress environments for practice (Krashen, 1982; Hoff, 2006). By addressing these socio-linguistic challenges and designing contextually relevant strategies, educators can improve English learning outcomes, build learner confidence, and make language education more equitable in rural settings. Future research may study how these context-sensitive strategies work through classroom-based interventions in rural schools and colleges, and add practical evidence to socially grounded ESL teaching (Ellis, 2010).

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