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The Role of Language in Shaping Educational Equity: Perspectives from Tribal Students

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Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in shaping educational equity, particularly for tribal students who often navigate the challenges of learning in a language different from their native tongue. This study examines how language use in the classroom influences teachers' perceptions of tribal students' abilities and the barriers these students face in accessing equitable education. Teachers' expectations, often shaped by students' proficiency in the dominant language, can lead to unconscious biases, affecting instruction, assessment, and overall academic opportunities. Language barriers further intensify these challenges by limiting tribal students' participation, hindering academic performance, and impacting their social and emotional well-being. Addressing these disparities requires culturally responsive teaching, fair assessment practices, and a supportive learning environment that values and integrates indigenous languages. Recognizing and actively addressing language-related challenges in tribal education is vital to ensuring fair access and fostering meaningful educational equity.

Keywords: Educational equity, Language barriers, Teacher expectations, Inclusive teaching practices, Tribal Students

Introduction

Language is not just a means of communication but a vital foundation of education, especially for tribal students who often encounter the challenge of learning in a language different from their mother tongue [Cummins, 2000; Gutierrez, 2008]. For tribal learners, language deeply influences how they access knowledge, interact in the classroom, and engage with the wider world. As the primary medium through which education is delivered, language shapes tribal students' academic experiences, often affecting their understanding of content and participation in learning activities. This impact goes beyond communication—language is closely tied to cognitive development, where proficiency is essential for building critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills [Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996]. For tribal students, limited exposure to the dominant classroom language can hinder the development of these crucial abilities, making it harder to navigate the curriculum and engage in meaningful learning. Appreciating the significance of language in the education of tribal students is fundamental to fostering their academic success and ensuring fair and inclusive learning opportunities. [Gee, 1990; Moll, 1992].

Recognizing the vital role of the mother tongue in a child's learning and identity development, the Education Policy of 1968 emphasized the importance of mother tongue-based instruction. Building on this foundation, the National Policy on Education (1986) and the Programme of Action (PoA 1992) acknowledged India's rich linguistic diversity and specifically advocated for the use of tribal students' native languages as mediums of instruction in tribal regions. These policies underscored the need to preserve and promote tribal languages within the education system, aiming to create a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment for tribal learners. The Constitution of India, through Articles 14, 15, 29, 30, 275(1), 350, 350A, and 350B, provides a strong legal framework for safeguarding linguistic rights and promoting mother tongue-based education for all, including tribal communities. These provisions recognize the importance of preserving and nurturing the diverse tribal languages spoken across the country. However, despite these constitutional safeguards, the implementation of mother tongue education in primary schools for tribal children remains inconsistent and inadequate. As a result, many tribal students are still taught in unfamiliar languages, leading to barriers in comprehension, participation, and overall academic progress.

Several research studies have consistently highlighted the challenges tribal students face due to language barriers in education. Mohanty (2009) emphasized that the “Educational failure of linguistic minorities worldwide is largely due to a disconnect between the students' home languages and the formal language of instruction”. This is particularly evident in tribal areas of India. For instance, Srivastava et al. (1971, as cited in Biswal & Mohanty, 2009) studied the educational challenges of the Saora community in Odisha and found that their academic underperformance was closely linked to the use of Oriya in schools instead of the students' native Saora language. Similarly, Ambashat (1970) noted that tribal students in Ranchi district were disengaged from schooling because their non-tribal teachers could not speak or understand their mother tongues, leading to a lack of connection and communication in the classroom.

Pattanayak (1981) also argued that in multilingual and multicultural societies, imposing a single dominant language as the medium of instruction marginalizes children who speak tribal languages, often leaving them illiterate in both their mother tongue and the imposed language. Sridhar (1996) further noted that the core issue lies in the lack of recognition and educational support for children who speak unrecognized or marginalized tribal languages. These findings collectively underscore the critical need for mother tongue-based multilingual education that respects and incorporates the linguistic heritage of tribal students.

Educational equity, rooted in the principle of fairness, seeks to ensure that all students, including tribal students, have equal opportunities to succeed academically [Banks, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995]. However, achieving this goal is closely tied to language, as the linguistic diversity of tribal communities can either bridge or deepen educational gaps [Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Nieto, 2010]. For many tribal students, the language spoken at home differs from the dominant language used in schools, creating significant barriers to understanding and engaging with the curriculum. These language challenges often limit their access to learning, leading to disparities in academic performance and hindering their overall educational experience. Addressing these barriers is essential to creating equitable learning environments where tribal students can thrive [August & Shanahan, 2006]. These barriers can create a cycle of disadvantage, where students struggle to fully participate in classroom activities, resulting in lower academic achievement and fewer educational opportunities (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valdés, 2001). Addressing these language-related challenges is essential for creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments, benefiting not just individual students but entire communities and societies (OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2015).

Need and Significance of the Study

Language plays a crucial role in shaping educational equity, particularly from the perspectives of tribal students, who often face unique linguistic and cultural challenges within mainstream education systems. Despite being home to one of the world's largest tribal populations—over **84.4 million Adivasis**—India's tribal communities continue to face widespread **exclusion from mainstream development** and endure persistent **educational disadvantages** (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020). The isolation of tribal groups, combined with their unique cultural identities, has perpetuated socioeconomic marginalization, particularly in education (Tribal Education, 2016). One of the primary needs is the preservation and inclusion of indigenous languages in the curriculum. For many tribal students, their mother tongue is deeply tied to their identity, culture, and worldview. When education is delivered solely in a dominant language, such as English, it can create feelings of alienation and lead to a disconnect from cultural heritage. Therefore, incorporating tribal languages into the classroom fosters a sense of belonging and pride, which in turn supports better engagement and learning outcomes. Another important need is the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy that respects and integrates tribal knowledge systems and oral traditions. Educators must be trained to use teaching methods that reflect students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which makes learning more relevant and effective. Additionally, support is needed to help students navigate the transition between their home language and the language of instruction. Without adequate linguistic support, tribal students may fall behind academically, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Research Questions

- 1 How does language use in the classroom influence teachers' perceptions of educational equity for tribal students?
- 2 What are the impacts of language barriers on tribal students' access to equitable educational opportunities?

Research Objectives

- 1 To explore how the language used by teachers in the classroom affects their understanding and implementation of educational equity for tribal students.
- 2 To examine how language barriers impact tribal students' ability to access, engage with, and benefit from equitable educational opportunities.

Methodology

The paper is purely descriptive in nature. Data has been collected from various secondary sources including journal articles, books and other scholarly resources.

Linguistic Barriers and Teacher Perceptions

In classrooms where the dominant language differs from tribal students' native languages, teachers may unknowingly perceive tribal students as less capable or academically weak due to their limited proficiency in the instructional language. This can lead to lowered expectations, reduced participation opportunities, and biased assessments, ultimately affecting teachers' views on educational equity for tribal learners.

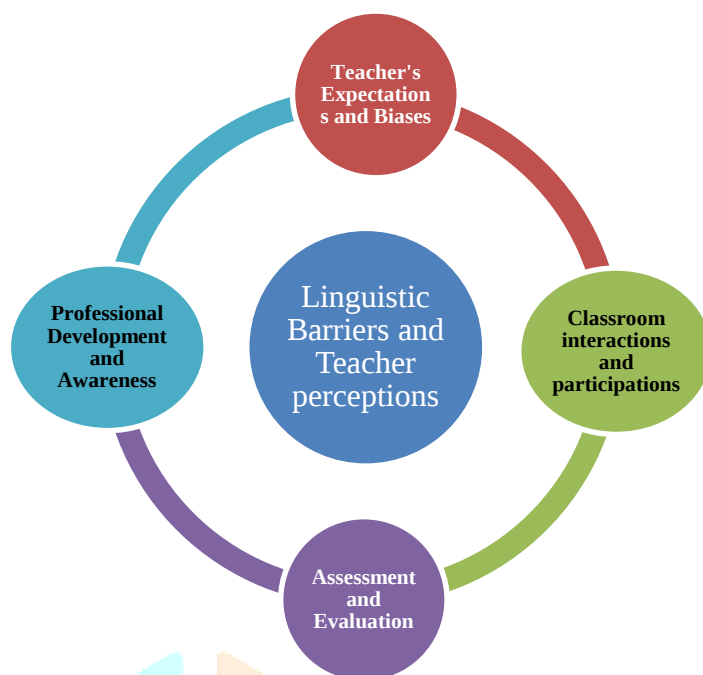
Teachers' Expectations and Biases: Research indicates that teachers' expectations are often subconsciously shaped by the way students use language. In the case of tribal students, who may speak indigenous languages or dialects that differ from the dominant medium of instruction, these linguistic differences can lead to lowered expectations from teachers. Influenced by societal stereotypes and limited understanding of linguistic diversity, educators may unintentionally view tribal students as less capable. As a result, these students might receive less academic support and encouragement. This bias, though often unintentional, reinforces educational inequities and hinders the academic progress of tribal learners (Bourdieu, 1991; Cummins, 2000).

Classroom Interactions and Participation: For tribal students, language proficiency plays a significant role in shaping their classroom experiences. Many tribal learners may speak indigenous or regional languages at home, which differ from the dominant language used in school instruction. As a result, they may face difficulties in expressing themselves fluently in classroom discussions. Teachers, often unconsciously, tend to perceive students who are more proficient in the dominant language as more attentive or capable, thereby offering them more opportunities to participate. Meanwhile, tribal students may be unintentionally overlooked or given fewer chances to engage, leading to an imbalance in attention and classroom interaction. This language-based dynamic can marginalize tribal students, limiting their academic involvement and reinforcing existing educational disparities (Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Delpit, 2006).

Assessment and Evaluation: For tribal students, language can significantly impact how their academic abilities are assessed and interpreted. Standardized tests and other formal evaluations are often designed in the dominant language, which may not align with the linguistic backgrounds of many tribal learners. As a result, these students may struggle to fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills, not due to a lack of understanding, but because of language barriers. This can lead teachers to inaccurately perceive them as less capable or academically weaker. Such assessments can obscure the true intellectual potential of tribal students, reinforcing misconceptions and contributing to educational inequities (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003; Abedi, 2002).

Professional Development and Awareness: The ability of teachers to support tribal students effectively is closely tied to their understanding of how language influences learning. Many tribal students come from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, and without proper awareness, teachers may unintentionally uphold biases that hinder these students' academic progress. Professional development programs that emphasize linguistic diversity and culturally responsive teaching can equip educators with the tools to recognize and address these challenges. By becoming more aware of the unique language experiences of tribal students, teachers can adopt more inclusive strategies that promote equitable participation and learning outcomes (Lucas & Villegas, 2013).

Language use in the classroom plays a critical role in shaping how teachers perceive and implement educational equity, particularly for tribal students. These perceptions are influenced by interconnected factors such as teacher expectations, classroom participation, assessment methods, and professional awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity. For tribal learners, whose home languages often differ from the dominant language of instruction, these dynamics can create barriers to full participation and academic success. Addressing these challenges through culturally responsive teaching practices and targeted professional development can help create more inclusive learning environments and promote equitable educational outcomes for tribal students.



Linguistic Barriers Undermine Tribal Students' Academic Potential

Language barriers restrict tribal students' ability to fully engage with the curriculum, understand concepts, and express their knowledge confidently. These barriers often result in poor academic performance, limited classroom participation, and reduced access to learning resources, further widening the educational gap and preventing tribal students from enjoying equal educational opportunities.

Academic Understanding and Success: Tribal students often face challenges in academic achievement when the language used in the classroom differs from their home or community language. This language gap can hinder their ability to fully grasp complex concepts, especially in subjects like math, science, and reading, where deep comprehension is essential. Importantly, these students may not struggle due to a lack of ability, but because they are unable to engage with the material in a language that is unfamiliar or less accessible to them. As a result, tribal students may fall behind their peers, which contributes to a widening achievement gap and reinforces existing educational inequalities (Abedi, 2002; Cummins, 2000).

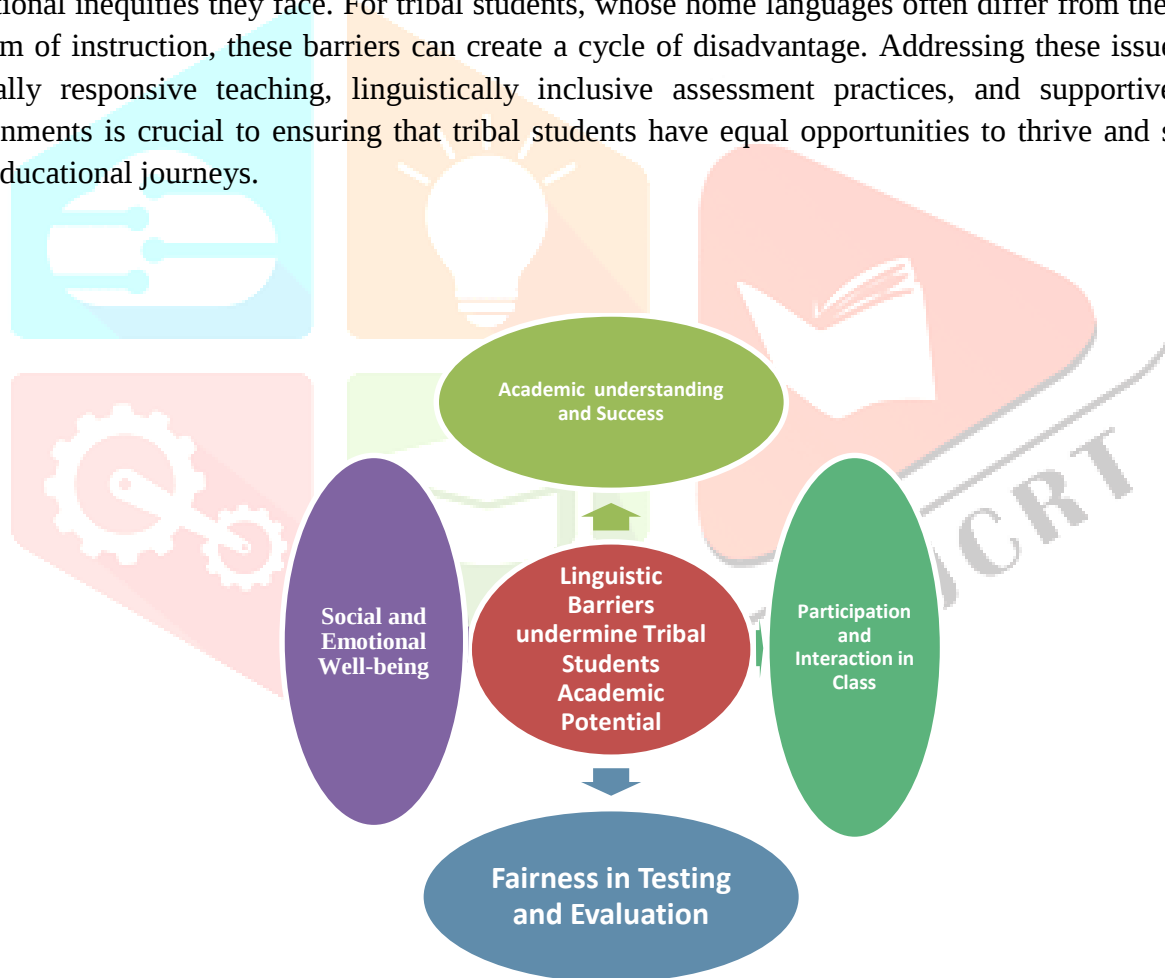
Participation and Interaction in Class: For tribal students, language barriers can significantly hinder active participation in classroom activities and discussions. When the language of instruction differs from their native or community language, these students may feel uncertain or anxious about speaking up, asking questions, or contributing their ideas. This hesitation can lead to reduced visibility in the classroom and fewer opportunities for engagement. Teachers, in turn, may mistakenly interpret this silence as a lack of understanding or interest, further marginalizing tribal students in the learning environment. Additionally, language challenges can create difficulties in building peer relationships, often resulting in social isolation and limited collaboration during group activities (García & Kleifgen, 2010; Delpit, 2006).

Fairness in Testing and Evaluation: Language barriers significantly affect how tribal students are assessed in school. Standardized tests and other evaluation methods are typically created with fluent speakers of the dominant language in mind, which can disadvantage tribal students whose primary language may be different. As a result, these students may receive lower scores—not because they lack subject knowledge, but because they struggle to fully understand or express themselves in the language used in the assessments. This mismatch can lead to inaccurate reflections of their true academic abilities,

reinforcing negative perceptions and contributing to ongoing educational inequalities (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003).

Social and Emotional Well-being: For tribal students, language barriers extend beyond academics and deeply affect their social and emotional well-being. When the language used in school differs from their mother tongue, these students may experience feelings of frustration, anxiety, or low self-esteem as they struggle to keep pace with their peers. This emotional strain can reduce their confidence and motivation to actively engage in classroom activities or learning. Furthermore, difficulties in communication can create a sense of exclusion, as tribal students may find it challenging to connect with teachers and classmates. This can lead to loneliness, social isolation, and a feeling of being marginalized within the school community (Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Delpit)

Language barriers significantly impact tribal students' ability to access and benefit from educational opportunities. These challenges influence their academic comprehension, classroom participation, fairness in assessments, and social inclusion—further contributing to the persistent educational inequities they face. For tribal students, whose home languages often differ from the dominant medium of instruction, these barriers can create a cycle of disadvantage. Addressing these issues through culturally responsive teaching, linguistically inclusive assessment practices, and supportive learning environments is crucial to ensuring that tribal students have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed in their educational journeys.



Major Findings

1. Teacher Expectations and Language

Teachers often form their expectations based on how well students communicate in the dominant classroom language. For tribal students, who may struggle with a language that is different from their native tongue, this can result in teachers unintentionally lowering their expectations. Such assumptions may lead to unequal treatment, where tribal students receive less attention, fewer learning opportunities,

and limited support—not because of their abilities, but due to language barriers. This cycle reinforces educational disadvantages and widens the gap in learning outcomes for tribal students

2. Academic Performance and Language Barriers

Tribal students who face language challenges often struggle to keep up in subjects like math, science, and reading—not due to a lack of ability, but because the language barrier makes it difficult for them to fully understand the concepts being taught. When instruction is delivered in a language unfamiliar to them, tribal students may miss key information, leading to gaps in learning. Over time, this causes them to fall behind their peers, further widening the gap in academic performance.

3. Classroom Participation and Social Interaction

Language barriers often prevent tribal students from actively participating in class discussions and activities. Struggling with the dominant classroom language, many tribal students may hesitate to speak up or share their thoughts, leading to reduced interaction with peers and teachers. This limited participation not only affects their learning but also makes them feel isolated, disconnected, and less visible in the classroom environment.

4. Social and Emotional Well-being

Language barriers can significantly affect the social and emotional well-being of tribal students. Struggling to understand or express themselves in the classroom language often leads to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and low self-esteem. When tribal students find it hard to keep up with their peers due to language difficulties, they may lose motivation to participate in school activities. Over time, this emotional strain can lead to disengagement from learning and further widen the gap in educational equity for tribal students.

Suggestions:

1. **Parental awareness and education:** Maximum of the learners in the tribal areas are first generation learners and they don't know other languages rather than their own dialects and all this is due to lack of education. Students use to talk and work in Hindi and English in schools while at home they use to talk in local languages which have no script. So it is not possible to provide the syllabus in their own languages. We need to aware the parents and also need to educate parents so the development of their child.
2. **Need to Prepare Teachers of Local Languages:** If we want to promote tribal languages than first of all we need to prepare teachers for tribal languages and in tribal areas they must be appointed to teach the script and grammar of tribal languages. But main issue is that some of the tribal languages do not have script. In this condition the concept of tribal languages may affect.
3. **Higher Education Institutions:** Higher education institutions should build in the tribal areas and tribal students should be enrolled there on priority.
4. **Cultural Program Should be in Local Language Instead of Whole Curriculum:** It was suggested by the teachers and eminent persons that due to lack of script for all languages we can't provide curriculum in all languages. So one thing which is possible to promote local languages that we can make local languages compulsory in all cultural events in that particular area. It will help to promote the culture along with the language also.
5. **Awareness Programs:** Proper awareness programs should be organized to create the awareness about the importance of education in modern era. Extensive literacy campaign in the tribal dominated districts may be undertaken on a priority basis to literate the tribal.

6. **Social security Schemes:** Social security schemes like scholarships and free education should be promoted in tribal areas.
7. **Appointment of Local teachers and Female teachers:** It is suggested to appoint more tribal teachers and female teachers in the tribal areas. The ecological, cultural, psychological characteristics of tribal children should be considered carefully by the teachers in tribal areas.

Conclusion

Language plays a crucial role in the education of tribal students, influencing how teachers perceive them and how they engage with their learning environment. Teachers often form expectations based on students' proficiency in the dominant classroom language, which can lead to unconscious biases and unequal treatment. When tribal students struggle with the instructional language, they may be seen as less capable, resulting in lower expectations, reduced support, and fewer opportunities to participate in classroom activities. This challenge is especially significant for tribal students who speak indigenous languages or dialects, as they face additional barriers that impact their academic success and overall educational experience. Tribal students often face unique challenges in the classroom due to language barriers, which can cause them to fall behind academically and widen the achievement gap. In classroom settings, students who are fluent in the dominant language tend to participate more actively in discussions, while tribal students who struggle with the language may hesitate to engage. This leads to feelings of isolation, reduced motivation, and a lack of confidence in their abilities. The social and emotional well-being of tribal students is closely connected to their academic success, and language barriers create significant hurdles in this regard. Additionally, standardized tests and assessments are usually designed with native speakers of the dominant language in mind. This puts tribal students at a disadvantage, as their test performance may not reflect their true understanding or potential but rather their struggle with the language used in the questions. Such assessments often fail to capture the actual knowledge and skills of tribal students, leading to unfair evaluations. To address these challenges, it is crucial to equip teachers with the skills and understanding needed to support tribal students facing language barriers. This can be achieved through inclusive teaching practices, culturally sensitive and language-friendly assessments, and creating a supportive classroom environment that respects and values tribal languages and cultures. By building an educational system that acknowledges and accommodates the linguistic needs of tribal students, we can ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to succeed, moving closer to achieving true educational equity.

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