Students' Psychology on English: Breaking the Barriers for Enhancing English Proficiency among Students in Assam

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Abstract:

This paper examines the multifaceted issues of why students of Assamese medium educational institutions are afraid of English. It explores various themes such as historical context, socio-cultural factors, pedagogical challenges, psychological factors, lack of exposure, and economic constraints. The study highlights the significant psychological barriers that contribute to students' apprehension towards learning English and proposes a conceptual framework to improve English proficiency in Assam. This framework includes integrating local history and culture into the curriculum, implementing interactive teaching methodologies, building student confidence, ensuring equitable resource distribution, increasing exposure through media and technology, and implementing supportive policies and systems. The aim is to create a more inclusive and effective English teaching-learning environment for the Assamese medium students in Assam.

Keywords: English language learning, Assam, students' psychology, socio-cultural factors, pedagogical challenges, psychological barriers

Introduction:

The fear of English among students of Assamese medium academic institutions in Assam is a significant educational challenge that impedes their academic performance and professional opportunities. English, the global lingua franca, is indispensable in various fields including international trade, commerce, and communication. Mastery of the English language is crucial for participating in global markets, accessing international educational resources, and enhancing career prospects. Despite this, many students in Assam experience considerable anxiety and fear towards learning English and this happens basically with the students who studies in vernacular medium.

This phenomenon can be attributed to a complex interplay of historical, socio-cultural, pedagogical, psychological, and economic factors. Historically, English was introduced in Assam during British colonial rule, creating a socio-economic divide, and establishing English as a language of power and prestige. Socio-cultural dynamics further complicate this issue, as the strong cultural identity associated with the Assamese language often leads to resistance against English. Pedagogical challenges such as outdated teaching methods and a lack of trained teachers exacerbate the problem, while psychological factors like language anxiety and low self-esteem create additional barriers. Furthermore, limited exposure to English outside the classroom and economic constraints that restrict access to quality education resources contribute to the widespread fear of English.

Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective strategies to improve English proficiency among the Assamese medium students in the state. This paper aims to explore the root causes of the fear of English and propose a comprehensive framework to address these challenges. By integrating local history and culture into the curriculum, employing interactive teaching methodologies, building student confidence, ensuring equitable resource distribution, increasing exposure through media and technology, and implementing supportive policies and systems, it is possible to create a more inclusive and effective English learning environment for the students. Through these efforts, we can enhance their academic and professional prospects, enabling them to participate more fully in the global community.

English for Academic and Professional Development:
The English language plays a crucial role in global trade, business communication, digital commerce, financial literacy, and academic/professional development. Its significance lies in facilitating cross-border collaboration, ensuring clarity in communication, leveraging digital marketing tools, understanding financial documents, and accessing academic resources for growth and knowledge dissemination. Proficiency in English is essential for success in various aspects of commerce on a global scale. The significance of learning English is clarified below:

English in Global Trade and Commerce: English is vital in global trade due to its status as the primary language of business. This universality facilitates international negotiations, enhances understanding of international regulations, and promotes efficient trade practices. According to Neeley (2012), the adoption of English as a corporate language boosts cross-border collaboration and operational efficiency, which are crucial in global trade settings. Tietze (2008) discusses how English helps overcome language barriers and fosters a shared corporate culture, critical for multinational companies.

English in Business Communication and Correspondence: The necessity of English in business communication cannot be overstated. It ensures that messages are conveyed accurately and professionally. Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, and Kankaanranta (2005) emphasize the role of English in business communication, highlighting its importance in maintaining professional relationships and ensuring clarity in business correspondence. Nickerson (2005) provides insights into how English proficiency impacts internal and external business communication in multinational organizations.

English and Digital Commerce: The digital commerce landscape heavily relies on English, which serves as the main language for most platforms and digital marketing strategies. According to Kannan and Li (2017), English proficiency is crucial for leveraging digital marketing tools and understanding global consumer behaviour. They assert that English enables better engagement with global audiences and the execution of effective digital marketing campaigns. Similarly, Efendioglu and Yip (2004) discuss how English facilitates e-commerce by providing a common language for online transactions and customer interactions.

English and Financial Literacy: English is indispensable for financial literacy, as most financial education resources, market analyses, and certifications are in English. Pandey and Pandey (2014) stress the importance of English proficiency for understanding financial documents, participating in global markets, and pursuing professional certifications such as CFA and CPA. The availability of financial information in English also aids in the global exchange of financial knowledge, as discussed by Poon (2009).

English in Academic and Professional Development: English is the primary medium for academic and professional development in the commerce field. It enables access to leading journals, conferences, and educational resources. Swales (2004) highlights the role of English in academic publishing, noting that proficiency in English is crucial for contributing to and staying abreast of the latest research in commerce. Furthermore, Flowerdew (2013) examines the challenges non-native English speakers face in academia and underscores the necessity of English for professional growth and global knowledge dissemination.

Students' Psychology on English:
The teachers always feel that the Assamese medium students have a psychological constraint when using English as a medium of instruction. The fear of English among students from Assamese medium schools is a multifaceted issue rooted in historical, socio-cultural, pedagogical, psychological, and economic factors. Addressing this fear requires a comprehensive approach that includes updating educational policies, improving teaching methodologies, increasing exposure to English, and providing better resources and support systems. The causes are manifold as described below:

Historical Context and Educational Policies: The fear of English among students from Assamese medium academic institutions can be traced back to the historical and educational policies of the region. English, introduced during British colonial rule, was initially associated with the elite class, creating a socio-economic divide that persists today. Goswami (2013) explains that the colonial legacy left English as a language of power and prestige, alienating the general populace who continued to speak indigenous languages. This historical context has contributed to the perception of English as an elite and difficult language, thereby inducing fear among students.

Socio-cultural Factors: Socio-cultural factors play a significant role in the apprehension towards English among students in Assam. The strong cultural identity associated with the Assamese language and other regional languages can create a sense of resistance towards English. Talukdar (2016) highlights that the preservation of local languages and cultures often leads to a reluctance to embrace English, which is perceived as a threat to indigenous identities. This cultural resistance can manifest as fear or anxiety when students are required to learn and use English.

Pedagogical Challenges: The methods and quality of English language teaching in Assam also contribute to students' fear of the language. The traditional rote-learning approach, lack of trained teachers, and insufficient exposure to practical usage hinder effective language acquisition. According to Sharma (2015), the pedagogical practices in many schools are outdated, focusing more on grammar and translation rather than communicative competence. This ineffective teaching methodology exacerbates students' fear and reluctance to learn English.

Psychological Factors: Psychological factors, including anxiety and low self-esteem, significantly affect students' attitudes towards English. Many students in Assam experience language anxiety, a common phenomenon where learners feel apprehensive about using a second language due to fear of making mistakes or being judged. Mishra (2018) discusses how language anxiety, coupled with a lack of confidence and fear of negative evaluation, creates a psychological barrier that prevents students from actively engaging with English.

Lack of Exposure and Practice: Limited exposure to English outside the classroom environment also contributes to the fear of the language among students in Assam. English is often not used in daily communication, media, or social interactions, leading to inadequate practice opportunities. As noted by Deka (2017), this lack of exposure means students do not develop the necessary fluency and comfort with the language, resulting in a sense of unfamiliarity and fear when they encounter English in academic or professional settings.

Economic Constraints: Economic constraints can also limit access to quality English education and resources, further contributing to the fear of the language. Many families in Assam cannot afford private tuition or English-medium schooling, which are often perceived as better pathways to mastering the language. As Baruah (2014) points out, the disparity in educational resources between urban and rural areas exacerbates the fear of English among economically disadvantaged students, who may feel left behind in the competitive academic environment.

The Proposed Framework for Improved English:
The conceptual framework for improving English proficiency among students in Assam is a comprehensive approach that considers the unique cultural and historical context of the region. By integrating local history and culture into the curriculum, students can connect with the material on a deeper level, making learning more engaging and meaningful. The process of integration involves inclusion of the required skills, knowledge, values and attitudes in the curriculum. It means that what the curriculum offers to students for learning must be related to what the community requires. "In the organization of content and learning experiences (method of teaching), integration refers to the horizontal relationship of curriculum content and learning experiences. It is the merging of related content and experiences from different subject areas into one area of knowledge. It deals with using content from one subject area to solve problems in another content area." (Offorma 2016)

Teaching language cannot be separated from the culture because culture and language are interrelated and therefore inseparable. "Language and culture are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture." (Brown 2000) Therefore, one of the best ways of teaching English is to integrate local culture into the curriculum. The integration of the local culture into the curriculum for teaching English will help students to cope up with possible problems which may exist in intercultural communication. Understanding the culture of the native speakers of the English Language requires intercultural competence which can be developed through studying the own culture in the target language. If a situation can be created where the content of the English texts is prepared taking consideration of students' prior experience gathered in their daily lives, the teaching-learning process will be fruitful. This will encourage students to read the texts and also make them confident of their capabilities to grasp the language. Students' familiarity with the content will guide students to make sense of the lessons and authenticate this sense of the lesson with the utilization of their own framework. Teaching-learning of a language is always meaningful if content and students' experiences are intermingled. Students' local culture is the most striking factor to influence the process of acquiring the target language. "The local culture embodies any language and gesture, personal appearance and social relationship, religion, philosophy, values, courtship, marriage, family customs, food and recreation, work and government, education and communication systems, health, transportation, government systems, and economic systems which exist in part of regional societies." (Margana 2009)

There are many ways of integrating local culture into curriculum of the English language. In this context teachers' role is of prime importance. Since the teachers have to play a crucial role in developing students' competence in the target language, the teachers will have to incorporate the elements of local culture in the teaching activities such as a local topic for group discussion, local issues for home assignment, local culture in preparing teaching-learning materials and assignments, local festivals or environment for project works and so on. The authors of textbooks should also pay heed to the matter of incorporating local culture into the textbooks. Characters in text-books should not be only from the western countries, rather local names of the characters should be proportionally used depending on the contexts.
In addition, implementing interactive teaching methodologies helps to keep students actively engaged in the learning process, making it more enjoyable and effective. Building confidence and reducing anxiety among students is also crucial in improving English proficiency, as fear of making mistakes can often hinder language acquisition.
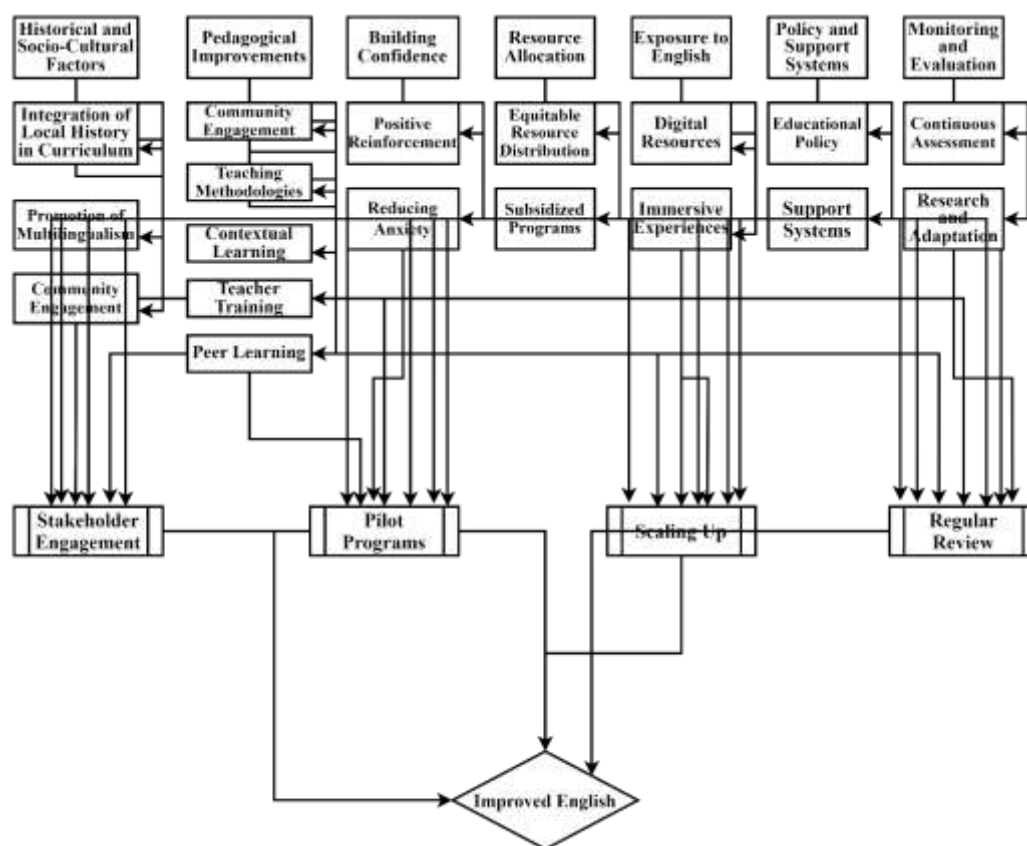
Conceptual Framework to Improve English Proficiency Among Students in Assam

Ensuring equitable resource distribution is essential to provide all students with the tools they need to succeed in learning English. This includes access to quality textbooks, technology, and other resources that can support their language development. Exposure to English through media and technology is another important aspect of the framework, as it allows students to practice their language skills in real-world contexts. By incorporating English into their daily lives through music, movies, and social media, students can improve their proficiency in a more natural and immersive way.

Finally, implementing supportive policies and systems at the institutional level is crucial to creating an environment that fosters English language learning. This includes providing professional development opportunities for teachers, creating support networks for students, and establishing clear guidelines for language instruction.

The implementation steps outlined in the framework involve engaging stakeholders at all levels, from teachers and administrators to parents and community members. Pilot programs can be used to test out new strategies and approaches, with successful practices then scaled up to reach a larger audience. Regular reviews and evaluations are conducted to measure progress and identify areas for improvement, ensuring that the framework is continuously evolving to meet the needs of students in Assam.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the fear of English among the Assamese medium students in Assam is a complex issue influenced by a myriad of factors including historical legacies, socio-cultural dynamics, outdated pedagogical practices, psychological barriers, limited exposure, and economic constraints. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates local culture and history, employs interactive teaching methods, builds confidence, ensures resource availability, promotes exposure through media and technology, and implements supportive institutional policies. By adopting this comprehensive framework, it is possible to create a more conducive environment for learning English, thereby enhancing the academic and professional prospects of Assamese medium students in the state. If this framework can be implemented, then the students from Assamese medium educational institutions would be beneficial as they will be equipped with methods for eradicating their psychological barriers in the teaching-learning process of the English language.

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