

Acquisition of ESL by the Young Learners of Rajbanshi Community of Cooch Behar

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Abstract: Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar is multilingual by nature. From childhood, Rajbanshi children are exposed to two-three languages spoken around them. As a result, apart from acquiring their first language (L1) they pick up words and phrases from other languages and uses them while communicating with others in their day-to-day life. They swap between English and their mother tongue (MT) during the course of their conversation, often without being aware of it. They also intermittently and involuntarily use English words and phrases while using their mother tongue. As a result, English does not remain alien to a Rajbanshi child when s/he gets engaged in the process of learning English as a Second Language (ESL). This paper focusses on the challenges that young learners of Rajbanshi community face in mastering the four language learning skills in the process of learning ESL, despite being exposed to English from childhood.

Keywords: multilingual, learning, Rajbanshi community, first language (L1), mother tongue (MT), English as a Second Language (ESL).

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Rajbanshi community is a significant community in Eastern India. Although there is a considerable debate regarding the ethnic identity of the Rajbanshis (Barman, 2020), they identify themselves as Hindu Kshatriyas and claim to be the descendants of the Royal family of the erstwhile Cooch Behar. Today they live in North Bengal, West Assam, Meghalaya, Bangladesh and Nepal and are classified as Scheduled Castes in West Bengal. The Rajbanshis have a rich cultural heritage and also have their own Rajbanshi language. As per 2001 census report, nearly one crore people speak the Rajbanshi language in West Bengal (DBDD). But recently it has been observed that because of the influence of modernity and the process of globalization, the Rajbanshi community is gradually losing its cultural identity and language.

II. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Rajbanshi community forms the largest group in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. In this paper I have tried to find out the problems and challenges faced by the young school students belonging to the Upper Primary Level of the Rajbanshi community in learning English as a Second Language (ESL) from the teachers' perspective. I have taken the teachers' viewpoint under the purview of my research since the teachers play a dynamic role as the facilitator rather than an instructor teaching the Second

Language (L2) in the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) which is in vogue in the Bengali-medium schools in West Bengal.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

CLT lays stress on developing the communicative competence of the learner. Its main objective is to help the learner to communicate in the target language in all possible situations (Bich, 2015). For this, the key element of CLT is the interaction of the learner with other learners in the class as well as the instructor. In this approach the learner can even incorporate his personal experience in his language-learning environment. The current research holds significance because it focusses on the Rajbanshi students to learn English as L2 through CLT in a multilingual class where apart from Rajbanshi students, there are students whose mother tongue (MT) is Bengali. The role of the teacher becomes challenging in this respect as s/he has to communicate to students belonging to different language backgrounds. Hence, the objective of my research is to find out whether the students of the Rajbanshi community are able to learn the English language in a multilingual class where the dominant language is Bengali. To explore this research problem, I have framed the following research questions.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What, according to teachers, are the problems faced by the Rajbanshi students in learning English as L2?
2. Whether CLT is effective in helping Rajbanshi students to learn English as L2?

V. METHODOLOGY

These research questions have been explored using both qualitative and quantitative strategies. A total of twenty-two state-run Secondary Bengali-medium schools of Cooch Behar district was chosen where a significant number of students belong to the Rajbanshi community. These schools were selected because the students belong to the age group when the formative years of language (L2) learning takes place. From these schools forty teachers who are directly involved in teaching English (L2) at the Upper Primary Level as per the current syllabus prescribed by West Bengal Board of Secondary Education were selected. These schools are located both in rural and urban areas. Of the forty teachers selected, twenty-two teachers teach in rural schools, whereas eighteen teachers teach in urban schools. This selection of teachers, both from urban and rural schools have helped me to assess the entire picture of English language learning (L2) among the Rajbanshi students in the Cooch Behar district. These teachers/respondents were given a questionnaire containing ten items based on 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Data received from the respondents were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to find mean and standard deviation, and carry out Independent Sample t-test. Moreover, personal interviews were taken of the respondents in order to find justification of the answers given by them.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the questions given in the questionnaire, the answers of the respondents were analysed. A null hypothesis (H_0) and an alternative hypothesis (H_1) for each question were assumed and an independent sample t-test was conducted to check which of the hypotheses can be accepted.

Question 1: Rajbanshi students speak Bengali fluently. Do you agree?

H_0 = Rajbanshi students cannot speak Bengali fluently.

H_1 = Rajbanshi students can speak Bengali fluently.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 1

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	4.0455	0.78542	1.489
Urban	18	3.5000	1.38267	

Table 1 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 4.0455, SD = 0.78542) is higher than Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 3.5000, SD = 1.38267). The calculated test statistics $t = 1.489$ at 25.711 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.149, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that the null hypothesis that Rajbanshi students cannot speak Bengali fluently is accepted at 95% confidence level.

Question 2: Rajbanshi students speak Rajbanshi fluently. Do you agree?

H_0 = Rajbanshi students cannot speak Rajbanshi fluently.

H_1 = Rajbanshi students can speak Rajbanshi fluently.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 2

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	4.0000	0.87287	0.188
Urban	18	3.9444	0.99836	

Table 2 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 4.0000, SD = 0.87287) is higher than Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 3.9444, SD = 0.99836). The calculated test statistics $t = 0.188$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.852, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that the null hypothesis that Rajbanshi students cannot speak Rajbanshi fluently is accepted at 95% confidence level.

Question 3: Rajbanshi students understand the School Language properly. Do you agree?

H_0 = Rajbanshi students cannot understand the School Language properly.

H_1 = Rajbanshi students can understand the School Language properly.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 3

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	4.1818	0.73266	1.386
Urban	18	3.8333	0.85749	

Table 3 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 4.1818, SD = 0.73266) is higher than Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 3.8333, SD = 0.85749). The calculated test statistics $t = 1.386$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.174, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis that Rajbanshi students cannot understand the School Language properly at 95% confidence level.

Question 4: Rajbanshi students consider English to be their 2nd language. Do you agree?

H_0 = Rajbanshi students do not consider English to be their 2nd language.

H_1 = Rajbanshi students consider English to be their 2nd language.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 4

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	2.5455	1.10096	0.489
Urban	18	2.7222	1.17851	

Table 4 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 2.7222, SD = 1.17851) is higher than Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 2.5455, SD = 1.10096). The calculated test statistics $t = 0.489$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.627, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis at 95% confidence level.

Question 5: Rajbanshi students consider English to be a difficult subject to learn. Do you agree?

H_0 = Rajbanshi students do not consider English to be a difficult subject to learn.

H_1 = Rajbanshi students consider English to be a difficult subject to learn.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 5

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	2.7273	1.07711	0.145
Urban	18	2.7778	1.11437	

Table 5 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 2.7778, SD = 1.11437) is higher than Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 2.7273, SD = 1.07711). The calculated test statistics $t = 0.145$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.885, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis at 95% confidence level.

Question 6: CLT has been successful in teaching the four skills of language learning to Rajbanshi students. Do you agree?

H_0 = CLT has not been successful in teaching the four skills of language learning to Rajbanshi students.

H_1 = CLT has been successful in teaching the four skills of language learning to Rajbanshi students.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 6

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	3.1364	1.08213	0.241
Urban	18	3.2222	1.16597	

Table 6 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 3.2222, SD = 1.16597) is higher than Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 3.1364, SD = 1.08213). The calculated test statistics $t = 0.241$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.811, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis at 95% confidence level.

Question 7: The rate of improvement of the Rajbanshi students in learning English is the same as that of

the students of other communities. Do you agree?

H_0 = The rate of improvement of the Rajbanshi students in learning English is not the same as that of the students of other communities.

H_1 = The rate of improvement of the Rajbanshi students in learning English is the same as that of the students of other communities.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 7

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	3.5000	0.74001	0.000
Urban	18	3.5000	0.92355	

Table 7 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 3.5000, SD = 0.74001) is the same as Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 3.5000, SD = 0.92355). The calculated test statistics $t = 0.000$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 1.000, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis at 95% confidence level.

Question 8: The current English syllabus cater to the needs of Rajbanshi students. Do you agree?

H_0 = The current English syllabus do not cater to the needs of Rajbanshi students.

H_1 = The current English syllabus caters to the needs of Rajbanshi students.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 8

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	3.2727	0.82703	1.266
Urban	18	2.9444	0.80237	

Table 8 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in rural areas (M = 3.2727, SD = 0.82703) is the same as that of Rajbanshi students in urban areas (M = 2.9444, SD = 0.80237). The calculated test statistics $t = 1.266$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.213, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis at 95% confidence level.

Question 9: Rajbanshi students mainly belong to the economically weaker section of the society. Do you agree?

H_0 = The Rajbanshi students do not belong to the economically weaker section of the society.

H_1 = The Rajbanshi students mainly belong to the economically weaker section of the society.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 9

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	3.2727	0.98473	1.733
Urban	18	2.7222	1.01782	

Table 9 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban

(n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in rural areas ($M = 3.2727$, $SD = 0.98473$) is higher than that of Rajbanshi students in urban areas ($M = 2.7222$, $SD = 1.01782$). The calculated test statistics $t = 1.7336$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.091, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis at 95% confidence level.

Question 10: The Rajbanshi students are first generation learners of their families. Do you agree?

H_0 = The Rajbanshi students are not first-generation learners of their families.

H_1 = The Rajbanshi students are first-generation learners of their families.

As per the answers of the respondents to this question, the mean difference is as follows:

Table 10

Place	N	Mean	SD	t
Rural	22	2.7273	0.82703	0.753
Urban	18	2.9444	0.99836	

Table 10 shows that as per the result of the independent sample t-test used for rural (n=22) and urban (n=18) school teachers to compare the mean, the score of Rajbanshi students in urban areas ($M = 2.9444$, $SD = 0.99836$) is higher than that of Rajbanshi students in rural areas ($M = 2.7273$, $SD = 0.82703$). The calculated test statistics $t = 0.753$ at 38 degrees of freedom shows the p-value as 0.456, which is greater than the default level of significance (0.05). This implies that we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternative hypothesis at 95% confidence level.

VII. ANALYSIS

The study revealed certain important facts about the problems faced by Rajbanshi students in learning English (L2) in Cooch Behar. Face to face interviews with the respondents also helped to clarify their responses and threw further light on the problems of Rajbanshi students. The study found that many Rajbanshi students have to a great extent lost touch with Rajbanshi language which is their mother tongue. This is because modernity and the process of globalization have led to cultural homogeneity. As a result, Rajbanshis find themselves alienated from their roots. Moreover, hegemony of Bengali culture and language have further affected the Rajbanshi language. It must be mentioned here that the Government of West Bengal have made concerted efforts to revive the Rajbanshi language. But the efforts have not yet yielded desired results. At the same the Rajbanshis have not yet got fully integrated with the Bengali culture. This accounts for the reason why they do not consider Bengali as their mother tongue (MT) and do not speak it fluently. This is also the reason why they are not at ease with the standard Bengali language which is the school language in all state-run Bengali-medium schools in West Bengal. Their language often takes the form of pidgin language.

It is true that language boundaries are porous and there is no “a language” (Agnihotri, 2007). In today’s world when geographical boundaries are fading, multilingualism is the norm. Moreover, multilingualism is not an obstacle to language learning. But in the peculiar case of Rajbanshis, the respondents feel that they oscillate between the Rajbanshi language and the Bengali language. Hence, they often have to learn L2 without recourse to L1. The respondents do not feel that the Rajbanshi students consider English to be a difficult language to learn. In this modern era where English is a ‘lingua franca’, the Rajbanshi students are aware of the importance of learning English. But English (L2) for them has become a third language, behind the Rajbanshi and Bengali language. This is the reason why the study found that the Rajbanshi students are lagging behind in learning English (L2) in comparison to students of other communities whose MT is Bengali.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study has not directed our attention to the problems of the Rajbanshi students in particular, but it has

also brought into focus how CLT operates in a multilingual society like ours. CLT is being used for teaching English (L2) in the state-run Bengali-medium schools of West Bengal since the last half of 1980s. But now and then questions have been raised regarding the efficacy of CLT in teaching English (L2). Although several reasons have been cited as the cause for this problem, no academic strategy has been adopted to counter the problems faced by the minority-language students so that they can study in equal terms with the majority-language children (Saraf, 2014). This has not only hindered their progress in pursuing their academic pursuits, but has also been a reason for accentuating inequality and discrimination in our society (Pattanayak, 1981). Hence to overcome this problem, more pragmatic teaching techniques need to be adopted which will take into consideration the linguistic variation of our students. Only then can the purpose of teaching and learning of English be not limited to mere passing the examination but also to using it in daily life, which in turn will have wider social implications.

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