



A Comparative Study of English Grammar Proficiency Among Urban and Rural Class VIII Students in Ernakulam District: An Analysis Based on Medium of Instruction and Gender

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Abstract

The acquisition of English grammar remains a central concern in the study of second language learning, particularly in multilingual and socio-economically diverse contexts such as Kerala. This paper investigates the differences in English grammar proficiency between urban English-medium and rural state-syllabus Malayalam-medium Class VIII students in Ernakulam district. A sample of 720 students — 60 students each from 12 schools comprising both government and aided institutions — was administered a printed grammar questionnaire consisting of ten sets of questions covering tenses, articles, prepositions, error correction, and sentence construction. Convenience sampling was employed to select the participants. The findings reveal that urban English-medium students significantly outperform their rural state-syllabus-medium counterparts across all grammatical categories. Furthermore, a gender-based analysis indicates that boys demonstrate higher overall proficiency than girls in both groups. The study situates these findings within broader frameworks of sociolinguistic theory and the input hypothesis, and concludes with pedagogical implications for improving English grammar instruction in rural and vernacular-medium schools.

Keywords: English grammar proficiency, urban-rural divide, medium of instruction, gender differences, Class VIII, Ernakulam district, Kerala.

1. Introduction

English occupies a unique and powerful position in the Indian educational landscape. As the language of higher education, professional advancement, and global communication, proficiency in English — and particularly in its grammatical structures — is widely regarded as a determinant of academic and career success. In Kerala, English functions as a second language for the majority of students, yet the context in which it is taught and learned varies enormously across the urban-rural divide and across differing media of instruction.

Urban schools following the English medium provide students with continuous and intensive exposure to the English language both within and outside the classroom. Students in these settings encounter English in their textbooks, peer interactions, and through digital media. Rural students attending state-syllabus Malayalam-medium schools, on the other hand, receive English instruction

primarily as a subject rather than as the medium of all learning, thereby limiting their contact hours and contextual exposure to the language.

Ernakulam district, as the commercial capital of Kerala encompassing both densely urbanised zones and rural hinterlands, provides an ideal research setting for examining such disparities. The present study investigates English grammar proficiency differences between urban English-medium and rural state-syllabus-medium Class VIII students in this district, with additional attention to gender-based variations. Identifying specific grammatical competency gaps at the middle school level is critical, as Class VIII represents a formative stage in students' language development before they advance to higher secondary education.

2. Review of Related Literature

The relationship between medium of instruction and language proficiency has been extensively studied in post-colonial multilingual societies. Cummins (1979) proposed the interdependence hypothesis, arguing that proficiency in a second language is partly dependent on the degree of literacy developed in the first language. His threshold hypothesis further suggested that a minimum level of competence in both languages is necessary before cognitive benefits of bilingualism can be realised. These theories are particularly relevant in the Kerala context, where Class VIII students navigate between Malayalam and English in their academic lives.

Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis posits that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current level of competence. Urban English-medium students, by virtue of sustained immersive exposure to English, receive far greater quantities of such input than their rural counterparts. This differential in input inevitably shapes grammatical competence over time. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory further highlights the role of the social and institutional environment in shaping language development, lending theoretical support to the observation that school environment and medium significantly influence grammatical outcomes.

With respect to gender and language learning, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) reported verbal superiority in girls, a finding replicated in several vocabulary and reading studies. However, grammar-specific research has yielded varying results depending on socio-cultural context. In many Indian rural settings, boys tend to have greater access to English tutoring and supplementary coaching, which may account for higher grammar scores among males. Previous Kerala-based studies by Nair (2015) and Thomas (2018) highlighted persistent urban-rural gaps in English proficiency without adequately addressing the gender dimension in rural government-medium schools at the middle school level.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design using a quantitative approach. The target population comprised Class VIII students from both urban English-medium and rural state-syllabus Malayalam-medium schools in Ernakulam district, Kerala. Schools selected included both government and government-aided institutions to ensure representation across school management types.

A purposive cluster sampling method was employed. A total of 12 schools were selected — six urban English-medium schools and six rural state-syllabus Malayalam-medium schools — based on accessibility and institutional willingness to participate. In each school, the principal designated a specific Class VIII section for the study, and all students present in that section on the day of data collection formed the sample. This approach, wherein an intact classroom group is assigned by school administration, is a widely used and practical strategy in school-based educational research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). From each school, 60 Class VIII students participated, yielding a total sample size of 720 students. The sample included both boys and girls, enabling a gender-based comparative analysis within each group.

The primary data collection instrument was a printed grammar questionnaire administered in the classroom under the supervision of the researcher. The questionnaire comprised ten sets of questions designed to assess five key grammatical areas: (i) tenses, (ii) articles, (iii) prepositions, (iv) error identification and correction, and (v) sentence construction. Each set was carefully designed to test both receptive grammatical knowledge — the ability to recognise correct forms — and productive grammatical knowledge — the ability to construct grammatically accurate sentences. The questionnaire was administered during regular school hours, and students were given sufficient time to complete it without external assistance.

Responses were scored using a standardised rubric, and mean scores were computed for each grammatical sub-category as well as for the overall questionnaire. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics to compare performance across the urban-rural and gender dimensions.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Urban vs. Rural Grammar Proficiency

The most prominent finding of this study is the marked and consistent superiority of urban English-medium students over rural state-syllabus Malayalam-medium students across all five grammatical domains assessed. Urban Class VIII students recorded higher mean scores in tenses, articles, prepositions, error correction, and sentence construction. This pattern was consistent across all sub-categories, affirming that the medium of instruction plays a decisive role in shaping grammar proficiency even at the middle school level.

The most pronounced gap appeared in sentence construction, where the productive and integrative use of grammatical knowledge is required. Urban students, accustomed to composing in English across multiple subjects daily, demonstrated stronger command of clause ordering, subject-verb agreement, and tense sequencing. Rural students showed a tendency toward direct translation from Malayalam, resulting in structurally deviant but semantically intelligible constructions — a pattern consistent with first language transfer (Lado, 1957).

The article usage category also revealed a significant disparity. Since definite and indefinite articles are absent from Malayalam grammar, this represents a particularly challenging area for Malayalam-medium learners. Urban students' continuous exposure to written and spoken English facilitated greater internalisation of article rules, while rural students frequently omitted articles or used them incorrectly. Similarly, in the prepositions category, rural students exhibited reliance on a limited set of prepositions regardless of context, while urban students demonstrated greater range and accuracy.

4.2 Gender-Based Differences

A secondary but noteworthy finding concerns gender-based differences in grammar proficiency. Across both urban and rural groups, boys scored higher than girls on the overall grammar questionnaire. This finding diverges from the widely cited observation that girls tend to outperform boys in verbal and linguistic tasks in Western research contexts. In the present study, the higher scores of boys may be attributable to greater access to English-language supplementary resources, private tutoring, and technology-mediated English exposure through digital media among male students in both urban and rural settings.

In rural areas particularly, gender disparities in access to educational resources persist. Girls in rural households may have fewer opportunities for informal English language practice outside school hours due to domestic responsibilities and restricted mobility. This socio-cultural dimension of language learning appears to play a significant mediating role in shaping grammar outcomes among Class VIII students, calling for a more gender-sensitive approach to English pedagogy in rural government and aided schools.

5. Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study carry significant implications for curriculum planning, teacher training, and language policy in Kerala. First, the persistent urban-rural gap in grammar proficiency among Class VIII students underscores the need for differentiated instruction in state-syllabus schools. Teachers in rural settings should be equipped with strategies that explicitly address L1 interference, particularly in article usage, prepositions, and sentence construction. Contrastive analysis exercises drawing deliberate attention to structural differences between Malayalam and English may prove especially effective at this level.

Second, the government of Kerala should consider substantially increasing the quantity and quality of English input in state-syllabus schools from the primary level onwards. Initiatives such as language laboratories, digital English learning modules, and structured reading programmes can help bridge the input gap that currently separates urban and rural learners by Class VIII. The Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan framework offers a policy vehicle for implementing such interventions at scale across Ernakulam and similar districts.

Third, the gender gap identified in this study warrants targeted attention. Schools should create supportive environments providing girls, particularly in rural settings, with equal opportunities to engage with English through reading clubs, debate activities, and technology access. Teacher training programmes should incorporate gender-sensitive pedagogical approaches recognising the differential social pressures faced by boys and girls in their language learning journeys.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that significant disparities in English grammar proficiency exist between urban English-medium and rural state-syllabus Malayalam-medium Class VIII students in Ernakulam district. Drawing on a sample of 720 Class VIII students from 12 government and aided schools, with class sections designated by school principals through purposive cluster sampling, the research found that urban students consistently outperformed rural students across all five grammatical categories tested through a printed questionnaire — tenses, articles, prepositions, error correction, and sentence construction. Boys outperformed girls in both groups, pointing to the intertwining of medium of instruction, gender, and socio-economic access in shaping language proficiency.

These results reinforce the call for equitable English language education policies that address the structural and socio-cultural factors producing and perpetuating these gaps from an early stage. Future research might usefully extend this work by incorporating qualitative data on student attitudes, teacher competency, classroom interaction patterns, and parental educational backgrounds, painting a fuller picture of the complex ecology within which English grammar learning takes place among middle school students in Kerala.

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