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Demographic and Academic Determinants of Communicative English Perception: Implications for Language Policy in West Bengal Higher Education

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Abstract

Understanding demographic and academic variations in students' perceptions of communicative English is essential for designing equitable and effective language education policies. This study examined how perception towards communicative English (PCE) varies across gender, geographical location, family income, family type, and scholastic stream among 639 undergraduate students (186 male, 453 female) from 16 colleges across four districts of West Bengal, India. Using a validated 44-item PCE Scale (α = 0.887), the study categorized students into high (20.0%), middle (37.9%), and low (42.1%) PCE levels. Significant differences emerged across scholastic streams, with Science students (M = 128.45, SD = 44.71) demonstrating significantly higher PCE than Arts students (M = 118.48, SD = 38.41; t = 2.525, p < 0.01). Family monthly income showed significant effects on PCE (F = 3.135, p < 0.05), with students from higher-income families (₹30,000+) and middle-income families (₹5,001-10,000) showing stronger perceptions. No significant differences emerged for gender (t = 0.339, p = 0.735), geographical location (t = 0.130, p = 0.897), or family type (F = 0.870, p = 0.419). Distribution patterns revealed urban students (n=91 in high category) outnumbered rural students (n=37), and females (n=92 in high category) outnumbered males (n=36), though these differences were not statistically significant. The findings highlight the need for targeted language support for Arts students and students from lower-income families, while suggesting that gender, location, and family type may not require differential treatment in language policy design.

Keywords: *Communicative English Perception, Demographic Factors, Scholastic Stream, Language Policy, Undergraduate Students, West Bengal*

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1. Introduction

In the multilingual and educationally diverse landscape of India, students' perceptions of communicative English—their attitudes, beliefs, and confidence regarding English communication—play a crucial role in language acquisition outcomes and subsequent academic and professional opportunities (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005). West Bengal, with its distinct linguistic heritage and educational traditions, presents a unique context for examining how demographic and academic factors shape students' English perceptions. The state's undergraduate population encompasses students from varied socio-economic backgrounds, geographical locations, family structures, and academic streams, each potentially influencing how students regard and engage with communicative English.

Understanding these variations is essential for several reasons. First, equitable language education requires identifying groups that may hold less positive perceptions and require targeted support. Second, effective curriculum design must account for diverse student backgrounds and their associated learning needs. Third, resource allocation for language programmes should be informed by evidence of where needs are greatest. Fourth, teacher preparation programmes must prepare educators to address varied student perceptions effectively.

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Despite the importance of this understanding, comprehensive research examining demographic and academic variations in communicative English perception among West Bengal's undergraduate students remains limited. This study addresses this gap by systematically investigating how PCE varies across gender, geographical location, family income, family type, and scholastic stream.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Language Perception

Gardner's (1985) Socio-Educational Model emphasizes the role of attitudes and motivation in language learning, distinguishing between integrative orientation (desire to learn language for interaction with target language community) and instrumental orientation (practical benefits of language proficiency). Both orientations shape learners' perceptions and engagement with language learning.

Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System extends this framework, incorporating the ideal L2 self (the L2 speaker one wishes to become), ought-to L2 self (attributes one believes one should possess to meet expectations), and L2 learning experience (immediate learning environment). These components interact with demographic and contextual factors to shape language learning perceptions and behaviours.

2.2 Demographic Factors in Language Perception

Gender: Research on gender differences in language attitudes has yielded inconsistent findings. Some studies report more positive attitudes among females (Kobayashi, 2002), while others find no significant differences (Kheder & Rouabhia, 2023). These inconsistencies may reflect cultural and contextual variations.

Geographical Location: Urban-rural differences in language attitudes are frequently documented, with urban students often showing more positive attitudes due to greater exposure to English through media, institutions, and diverse populations (Chohan & Khan, 2016). However, higher education may partially mitigate these differences.

Socioeconomic Status: Family income and parental education consistently relate to language attitudes and achievement, with higher SES associated with more positive outcomes (Graddol, 2010). Access to English-medium schooling, educational resources, and supportive learning environments mediates these relationships.

Family Type: Family structure may influence language learning through differential availability of educational support, encouragement, and resources. Research on this variable remains limited.

Scholastic Stream: Academic stream differences in language attitudes are documented, with science students often showing more positive attitudes due to perceived relevance for scientific literature and international collaboration (Chen & Kraklow, 2015; Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The study employed a descriptive survey design with 639 undergraduate students from 16 colleges across four districts of West Bengal (Nadia, North 24 Parganas, Purba Bardhaman, and Hooghly). The sample included 186 male and 453 female students, aged 21-23 years, from Arts (n=513) and Science (n=126) streams. Participants represented rural (n=184) and urban (n=455) areas, with diverse family types (joint family: 279, nuclear family: 320, single-parent family: 40) and monthly family incomes ranging from below ₹5000 to above ₹30000.

3.2 Instrument

The Perception towards Communicative English (PCE) Scale was developed and validated for this research. The final 44-item scale ($\alpha = 0.887$) comprised four dimensions: Cognitive Perception (17 items, $\alpha = 0.759$), Affective Perception (13 items, $\alpha = 0.752$), Behavioural Perception (9 items, $\alpha = 0.834$), and Confidence in English Communication (5 items, $\alpha = 0.834$). Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, crosstabulations, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA in SPSS. PCE levels were categorized based on percentile distribution: high (161-212), middle (111-160), and low (45-110).

4. Results

4.1 Overall PCE Levels

Of the 639 participants, 128 students (20.0%) demonstrated high PCE (scores 161-212), 242 students (37.9%) showed moderate PCE (scores 111-160), and 269 students (42.1%) exhibited low PCE (scores 45-110).

4.2 Gender Variations

Distribution patterns showed females dominating all PCE levels: high (n=92 vs. males n=36), middle (n=172 vs. males n=70), and low (n=189 vs. males n=80). However, independent samples t-test revealed no statistically

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significant difference in mean PCE scores between male (M = 119.00, SD = 38.28) and female (M = 120.00, SD = 40.56) students (t = 0.339, df = 637, p = 0.735).

4.3 Geographical Location Variations

Urban students outnumbered rural students in all PCE levels: high (n=91 vs. rural n=37), middle (n=177 vs. rural n=65), and low (n=187 vs. rural n=82). However, t-test results showed no significant difference in mean scores between rural (M = 120.13, SD = 39.75) and urban (M = 120.58, SD = 39.99) students (t = 0.130, df = 637, p = 0.897).

4.4 Family Monthly Income Variations

Distribution across income groups revealed:

- Below ₹5000: High PCE (n=11), Middle (n=23), Low (n=17)
- ₹5,001-10,000: High (n=48), Middle (n=78), Low (n=67)
- ₹10,001-20,000: High (n=47), Middle (n=105), Low (n=134)
- ₹20,001-30,000: High (n=8), Middle (n=8), Low (n=23)
- Above ₹30,000: High (n=14), Middle (n=28), Low (n=28)

ANOVA results revealed significant differences in PCE scores across income groups (F = 3.135, p = 0.014), leading to rejection of the null hypothesis of no difference.

4.5 Family Type Variations

Distribution across family types:

- Joint family: High PCE (n=55), Middle (n=111), Low (n=113)
- Nuclear family: High (n=65), Middle (n=118), Low (n=137)
- Single-parent family: High (n=8), Middle (n=13), Low (n=19)

ANOVA results showed no significant differences in PCE scores across family types (F = 0.870, p = 0.419).

4.6 Scholastic Stream Variations

Distribution across streams revealed:

- Science stream: High PCE (n=42), Middle (n=43), Low (n=41)
- Arts stream: High (n=86), Middle (n=199), Low (n=228)

Independent samples t-test revealed significant differences in mean PCE scores between Science (M = 128.45, SD = 44.71) and Arts (M = 118.48, SD = 38.41) students (t = 2.525, df = 637, p = 0.002).

5. Discussion

5.1 Gender and PCE

The absence of significant gender differences in PCE, despite numerical female predominance, aligns with contemporary research suggesting diminishing gender gaps in language attitudes in higher education (Kheder & Rouabhia, 2023). This finding suggests that undergraduate education in West Bengal provides comparable opportunities for developing positive English perceptions among male and female students. However, the numerical patterns warrant attention: female students' higher representation in all categories reflects their larger sample proportion, but their 71.9% representation in high PCE category (92 of 128) exceeds their 70.9% sample proportion, suggesting slight overrepresentation that could cumulatively affect outcomes.

5.2 Geographical Location and PCE

The lack of significant urban-rural differences, despite numerical urban predominance, suggests that undergraduate education may partially equalize English perceptions across locations. This finding contrasts with some previous research documenting urban advantages (Chohan & Khan, 2016) but aligns with studies emphasizing higher education's equalizing potential (Bachore, 2022). The absence of statistical significance may reflect the shared college environment where rural and urban students encounter similar English-medium instruction, resources, and peer influences.

5.3 Family Income and PCE

The significant income-related differences warrant careful interpretation. Students from families earning ₹5,001-10,000 showed strong representation in high PCE (n=48), comparable to those earning ₹10,001-20,000 (n=47) and exceeding higher income groups. This pattern suggests that moderate economic resources may optimally support positive English perceptions—providing sufficient access to language-learning resources without the potential distractions or alternative priorities that higher income might entail.

The relatively lower high-PCE representation among highest-income groups (₹20,001-30,000: n=8; above ₹30,000: n=14) challenges assumptions that higher socioeconomic status uniformly benefits language attitudes. These students

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may attend English-medium schools and have greater exposure, yet their perceptions may be shaped by different factors including peer influences, academic pressures, or alternative priorities.

5.4 Family Type and PCE

The absence of significant family-type differences suggests that family structure alone may not determine English perceptions. However, the numerical patterns—single-parent families showing lowest high-PCE representation (n=8 of 40, 20.0%) compared to joint (19.7%) and nuclear (20.3%) families—warrants attention. The small single-parent family sample (n=40) limits statistical power, and non-significant findings should not be interpreted as evidence of no practical importance.

5.5 Scholastic Stream and PCE

The significantly higher PCE among Science students represents the study's most robust finding and requires explanation. Several mechanisms may operate:

Perceived Relevance: Science students may perceive stronger connections between English proficiency and their academic and career goals, given English's dominance in scientific literature, international research collaboration, and global scientific communication (Chen & Kraklow, 2015). This instrumental motivation may enhance positive perceptions.

Curricular Exposure: Science curricula often incorporate English-medium textbooks, research articles, and technical terminology, providing extensive exposure that shapes perceptions positively (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009).

Career Awareness: Science students may be more aware of global career opportunities requiring English proficiency, particularly in technology, research, and multinational corporations, fostering positive perceptions of communicative English's instrumental value.

Self-Selection: Students choosing Science streams may possess initially different language attitudes, though causality cannot be determined from cross-sectional data.

6. Implications

6.1 For Language Policy

The findings support differentiated language policy approaches. While gender, location, and family type may not require differential treatment, stream and income differences suggest targeted interventions:

- Arts stream students require enhanced language support recognizing their potentially lower perceptions and different motivational profiles
- Lower-income students (below ₹5,000) need resource support and exposure opportunities
- Moderate-income students' strong perceptions should be leveraged through advanced language opportunities

6.2 For Curriculum Design

Undergraduate English curricula should:

- Explicitly connect language learning to diverse career paths relevant to Arts students
- Provide authentic materials and tasks demonstrating English's relevance across disciplines
- Incorporate stream-specific language applications and examples
- Include confidence-building activities addressing lower perceptions among some groups

6.3 For Teacher Education

Teacher preparation programmes should:

- Prepare educators to recognize and address varied student perceptions
- Develop strategies for motivating Arts students and those from lower-income backgrounds
- Train teachers in creating inclusive language learning environments

6.4 For Institutional Practice

Colleges should:

- Assess incoming students' English perceptions to identify those needing support
- Provide targeted language development programmes for Arts students
- Ensure equitable access to language-learning resources across income groups
- Monitor perception development throughout undergraduate years

7. Limitations and Future Research

The cross-sectional design limits understanding of how perceptions develop and change. Longitudinal research tracking perception evolution throughout undergraduate years would provide valuable insights. Additionally, qualitative research exploring why Science and Arts students differ in perceptions could identify specific factors amenable to intervention.

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8. Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of demographic and academic variations in communicative English perception among undergraduate students in West Bengal reveals significant differences across scholastic stream and family income, while gender, location, and family type show no significant effects. The findings provide an empirical foundation for differentiated language policies and targeted interventions addressing the specific needs of Arts students and lower-income students. Understanding these variations is essential for designing equitable and effective language education that supports all students in developing positive perceptions crucial for language learning success.

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