

A Critical Study on: The Impact of Mother Tongue on Bhutanese Students While Learning English Language for Effective Communication Among Class Ten

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Abstract

This study critically examined the impact of mother tongue use on the English language learning of Bhutanese Class Ten students and on effective classroom communication. In Bhutanese classrooms, students frequently preferred to communicate in their respective mother tongues and other vernacular dialects rather than in the two official languages—English and Dzongkha. This practice often led to code-mixing, reduced fluency, and limited confidence in English communication.

The study aimed to determine whether the use of the mother tongue hindered or supported English language acquisition in classroom settings. A mixed-method research design was employed involving two Class Ten sections: one experimental group (N = 22), where students were allowed to use their mother tongue during English learning, and one control group (N = 22), where students were encouraged to communicate strictly in English. The study was conducted over four months.

Quantitative data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests, written assessments, and speaking tests. Qualitative data were gathered through questionnaires, classroom observations, and focus group discussions. Statistical comparison of test scores was used to determine differences between the groups.

The findings aimed to inform English teachers, school leaders, and curriculum developers in Bhutan about the role of mother tongue in second language acquisition and provided practical strategies for enhancing students' English proficiency.

Keywords: Bhutan, mother tongue interference, English language learning, classroom communication, second language acquisition, Class Ten students.

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Language is a powerful tool for communication, education, and national development. In Bhutan, both Dzongkha and English serve as official languages. English is widely used as the medium of instruction across schools in Bhutan. Since the introduction of modern education in the 1960s, English has played a significant role in curriculum delivery and academic success.

However, Bhutan is linguistically diverse, with students coming from different regions speaking various mother tongues such as Sharchopkha, Khengkha, Bumthangkha, and other dialects. In classroom settings, students often prefer to communicate in their mother tongue rather than English. Even when questions are asked in English, responses are frequently given in Dzongkha or local dialects.

This tendency raises concerns about English proficiency, especially at the secondary level, where academic content becomes more complex. Students who communicate confidently in English often perform better not only in English as a subject but also in other subjects taught in English. Therefore, understanding the impact of mother tongue use on English language learning is crucial.

1.2. Context of the Study

English is a compulsory subject and the medium of instruction in Bhutanese secondary schools. Despite its importance, many Class Ten students struggle with effective communication in English. It is observed that students mix languages while speaking, leading to grammatical inaccuracies, mispronunciation, and limited vocabulary development.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

The Bhutanese educational system placed considerable emphasis on English, making it a compulsory subject and a key determinant for higher education and employment opportunities. However, for many students, English was a second language, learned in an environment where their ancestral languages were distinct from English-speaking cultures. This linguistic distance often led to phenomena such as language transfer and interference, where the grammatical structures, phonology, and lexicon of the mother tongue influenced the learning of English. Understanding the dynamics of this interference was crucial for developing effective teaching methodologies that could foster genuine English proficiency. This study was motivated by the observed discrepancies in English language usage and proficiency within the classrooms. While some schools actively enforced English-only communication, others adopted more lenient approaches. The absence of a clear, evidence-based understanding of how mother tongue use impacted English learning in this specific context represented a significant research gap. By investigating this phenomenon, this research aimed to provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between first and second language acquisition, ultimately contributing to improved English language pedagogy in the school.

1.4. Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To investigate the extent to which mother tongue usage influenced English language proficiency among Class Ten students in Garpawong MSS.
- To identify specific patterns of mother tongue interference (e.g., phonological, syntactic, lexical) in the English language production of Class Ten students.

- To evaluate the effectiveness of a structured intervention aimed at restricting mother tongue use in the classroom on English language acquisition.
- To propose evidence-based strategies for teachers to mitigate negative mother tongue interference and promote English language learning.

1.4. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent did the use of mother tongue in the classroom correlate with English language proficiency among Class Ten students in Bhutan?
- What were the perceived benefits and hindrances of mother tongue use in English language learning, as reported by teachers and Class Ten students of Garpawoong MSS?
- What was the impact of a structured intervention (e.g., restricted mother tongue use) on the English language acquisition of Class Ten students compared to a control group?

1.5. Hypotheses

The study tests the following hypotheses:

- **H₀ (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant difference in English language performance between students who use their mother tongue in class and those who do not.
- **H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis):** There is a significant difference in English language performance between students who use their mother tongue in class and those who do not.

1.6. Reconnaissance

1.6.1. Situational analysis

The study was conducted at Garpawoong MSS, where it was observed that students frequently used their mother tongue in the English classroom. This practice was perceived as a potential barrier to effective English language acquisition. The school has a diverse student population with various mother tongues, making it a suitable environment to study the effects of mother tongue interference.

1.6.2. Competence

The researchers, Sonam Norbu and Sherab Tenzin, are teachers at Garpawoong Middle Secondary School and Orong Higher Secondary School, respectively, with a keen interest in improving English language pedagogy. They have also taken part in the Nationwide Action Research Workshop in 2025. Their direct involvement in the school provided them with a deep understanding of the context and the challenges faced by the students.

1.6.3. Literature review

Role of English in Global and Bhutanese Context

English has become the dominant global lingua franca used in international communication, diplomacy, higher education, science, technology, and global trade. According to the British Council (2023), English is currently used by more than 1.5 billion people worldwide either as a first, second, or foreign language. Its widespread use has positioned English as a critical tool for global mobility, digital participation, and economic competitiveness.

In the academic sphere, English remains the primary language of scientific publication, higher education, and international collaboration (Crystal, 2022). Proficiency in English enables access to global knowledge systems, research publications, and technological innovations. As a result, many non-native English-

speaking countries have adopted English as a medium of instruction (EMI) to enhance students' global competitiveness (Macaro et al., 2018; Rose & McKinley, 2018).

In Bhutan, English plays a similarly significant role. Since the introduction of modern education in the 1960s, English has been adopted as the primary medium of instruction across schools, alongside Dzongkha, the national language. English proficiency is strongly associated with academic success, employment opportunities, and social mobility in Bhutan. Competitive examinations, tertiary education admissions, civil service recruitment, and corporate employment frequently assess English competence. However, English remains a second language (L2) for Bhutanese learners. Students grow up speaking their respective mother tongues—such as Sharchopkha, Khengkha, Bumthangkha, and other dialects—within their homes and communities. This multilingual background creates a sociolinguistic environment where English is largely confined to formal educational settings. Research in second language acquisition suggests that limited exposure to English outside the classroom may reduce opportunities for authentic practice, affecting fluency and communicative competence (Ellis, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

Moreover, when English is used primarily as an academic subject rather than as a daily communicative tool, students may develop passive knowledge (reading and writing) but struggle with productive skills such as speaking and spontaneous interaction (Gass et al., 2020). This context makes it important to examine how first language use influences English acquisition within Bhutanese classrooms.

Mother Tongue Interference in Second Language Learning

Mother tongue interference, also known as language transfer, refers to the influence of a learner's first language (L1) on the acquisition of a second language (L2). According to Odlin (2003), transfer can occur at phonological, syntactic, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic levels. When structural differences between L1 and L2 are significant, learners may experience negative transfer, resulting in persistent language errors.

Phonological interference is among the most visible effects. Learners tend to pronounce English sounds based on the phonetic system of their mother tongue. As noted by Noviyenty and Putri (2019), differences in phoneme inventory and stress patterns often cause mispronunciation and reduced intelligibility. Similarly, Lightbown and Spada (2021) explain that learners substitute unfamiliar L2 sounds with the closest equivalent from their L1, leading to accented speech.

Grammatical interference is also common. Kasap and Emamviridi (2023) found that mispronunciation and grammatical errors are frequent outcomes of L1 interference. These may include:

- Incorrect word order
- Subject–verb disagreement
- Omission or misuse of articles
- Incorrect tense usage
- Spelling and vocabulary errors

Such errors often reflect structural differences between the first and target languages. For example, if a student's mother tongue does not use articles (“a,” “an,” “the”), learners may omit them in English sentences. Similarly, differences in sentence structure may lead to literal translation from L1 to L2, resulting in syntactic inaccuracies (Gass et al., 2020).

Interference can also affect lexical choices. Learners may directly translate idiomatic expressions from their mother tongue into English, leading to semantic errors. According to Ellis (2015), this phenomenon is common in multilingual contexts where learners mentally process ideas in their first language before expressing them in the target language.

Beyond structural errors, mother tongue interference can influence learners' confidence and communicative competence. When students fear making mistakes due to L1 interference, they may avoid speaking English altogether. This avoidance limits practice opportunities and slows language development (Macaro et al., 2018).

Thus, excessive reliance on mother tongue in English classrooms may restrict immersion, reduce exposure, and hinder the development of fluency and automaticity in English communication.

Positive Role of Mother Tongue

While many studies emphasise negative transfer, contemporary research also highlights the constructive role of mother tongue in second language learning. Modern bilingual education theories argue that L1 can serve as a cognitive scaffold that supports comprehension and conceptual development (Cummins, 2021).

According to Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, skills developed in the first language can transfer positively to the second language, particularly in areas such as literacy, reasoning, and academic concepts. When students have strong foundational skills in their mother tongue, they are better positioned to acquire academic English.

Recent research in translanguaging practices suggests that strategic use of L1 in classrooms can facilitate deeper understanding of complex content (García & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2022). For example, teachers may briefly explain difficult vocabulary or abstract ideas in students' mother tongue before transitioning back to English. This approach can reduce cognitive overload and enhance comprehension.

Lightbown and Spada (2021) note that completely banning the mother tongue may increase anxiety among learners, particularly in early stages of language acquisition. A balanced approach, where L1 is used strategically rather than excessively, may support a gradual transition toward greater English proficiency. In multilingual societies such as Bhutan, respecting students' linguistic identities can also enhance motivation and classroom participation. When learners feel their home language is valued rather than suppressed, they may demonstrate greater engagement in learning (Wei, 2022).

Therefore, the debate remains whether the mother tongue acts as a barrier or a bridge. The effectiveness of L1 use depends largely on how, when, and to what extent it is incorporated into classroom instruction. A structured and gradual reduction strategy, rather than total prohibition, may produce better outcomes in English language learning.

Chapter II: Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test control group design (Capili, 2024). This design was appropriate for investigating the causal impact of an intervention in a real-world educational setting where random assignment of students to classes was not feasible. The design involved administering a pre-test to both an experimental group and a control group, implementing an intervention with the experimental group, and then administering a post-test to both groups to measure the intervention's effect.

2.2. Data Analysis

2.2.1. Participant and sampling

The study was conducted at Garpawoong MSS and involved 44 Class Ten students. Two intact classes were selected through convenience sampling. One class (n=22) was assigned as the Experimental Group

(10A), and the other (n=22) as the Control Group (10B). The significant difference in pre-test scores between the two groups was acknowledged as a limitation of the study. This baseline difference suggested that the groups were not equivalent at the outset, and this was addressed in the data analysis and discussion.

2.2.2. Data collection tools

Data were collected using a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments:

- **English Language Proficiency Tests (Pre-test and Post-test):** A standardised English language proficiency test was administered to both groups before and after the intervention. The test assessed students' grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing skills.
- **Questionnaires:** A self-report questionnaire was administered to students in both groups to gather data on their attitudes towards English, the use of their mother tongue in and outside the classroom, and their perceptions of the learning environment.
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of students from both groups, as well as with the English teachers, to gain deeper insights into their experiences, perceptions, and the challenges they faced. One of the interviewees provided a nuanced view, suggesting that while mother tongue could be a tool for initial comprehension, its overuse could be detrimental (SP2). The student participant also supported the idea of restricting mother tongue use in the classroom to encourage students to learn English and Dzongkha (SP4).

2.3. Intervention plan

The intervention was implemented over a period of four months. The Control Group (10B) continued with their regular English language instruction, where the use of mother tongue was permitted as per current practice. The Experimental Group (10A) received an intervention focused on creating an immersive English language environment. This involved:

- **Structured English-Only Zones:** Specific classroom activities and periods were designated as "English-only," where students were encouraged to use only English for communication (ACTFL, 2010).
- **Scaffolding and Support:** Teachers provided additional scaffolding, such as visual aids, gestures, and simplified language, to support comprehension and reduce reliance on the mother tongue (Kayi-Aydar, 2013; Walqui, 2006).
- **Collaborative Learning:** Students engaged in structured pair and group work activities that required them to communicate in English to complete tasks (Kotkavuori, 2025).
- **Explicit Instruction:** Teachers provided explicit instruction on common areas of L1 interference, as identified through error analysis (Nazari, 2013).

2.4. Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from the participating students and their parents. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were ensured by using pseudonyms and coding for data analysis.

2.5. Findings and Discussion

Quantitative Findings

The study involved 44 Class Ten students across two groups: The Experimental Group (10A, n=22) and the Control Group (10B, n=22). Data were collected over eight cycles spanning four months (March to June 2025). The quantitative analysis revealed significant differences in English language proficiency between the two groups.

Table 1: Mean Test Scores and Standard Deviations Across All Eight Cycles

Cycle	Control Group (10B)	Experimental Group (10A)	Difference
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
1 (Pre-test)	78.70 (4.44)	60.85 (6.06)	-17.85
2	80.03 (4.00)	63.38 (6.80)	-16.65
3	79.77 (4.66)	66.19 (6.42)	-13.58
4	80.58 (5.12)	70.19 (7.29)	-10.39
5	81.06 (4.97)	72.58 (5.94)	-8.48
6	81.86 (5.90)	75.87 (8.06)	-5.99
7	82.54 (5.15)	78.60 (7.93)	-3.94
8 (Post-test)	82.34 (6.51)	80.16 (8.00)	-2.18

The data demonstrates a clear pattern of improvement in the experimental group across all eight cycles. While the control group showed minimal improvement (mean gain of 3.64 points from Cycle 1 to Cycle 8), the experimental group exhibited substantial progress (mean gain of 19.30 points). This difference was statistically significant ($t = 8.3754, p < 0.000001$).

Notably, the experimental group narrowed the initial performance gap from 17.85 points in Cycle 1 to just 2.18 points in Cycle 8. This trajectory suggests that the intervention focused on creating an immersive English language environment was highly effective in accelerating English language acquisition.

Table 2: Component Breakdown of Test Scores (Cycle 1 vs Cycle 8)

Component	Control Group (10B)	Experimental Group (10A)
	Cycle 1	Cycle 8
Grammar	19.66	21.07
Vocabulary	21.24	20.73
Reading Comprehension	20.13	19.15
Writing	19.45	20.95

The component analysis reveals that the experimental group made significant gains across all four language skills. Grammar improved by 5.23 points, vocabulary by 3.72 points, reading comprehension by 3.50 points, and writing by 6.32 points. The control group, by contrast, showed minimal changes in most components, with grammar improving slightly (1.41 points) and writing improving (1.50 points), while vocabulary and reading comprehension actually declined slightly.

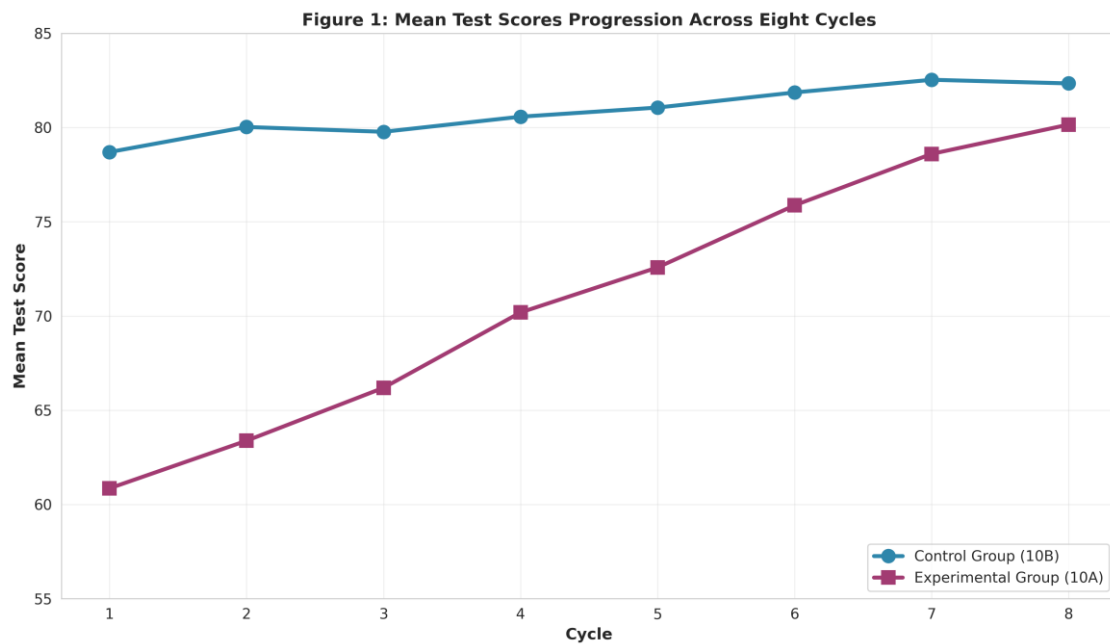


Figure 1: Mean Test Scores Progression Across Eight Cycles

Figure 1: This line graph illustrates the progression of mean test scores for both the control and experimental groups across the eight cycles of the study. It clearly shows the experimental group’s steep upward trajectory, starting from a significantly lower baseline and nearly closing the gap with the control group by the end of the intervention.

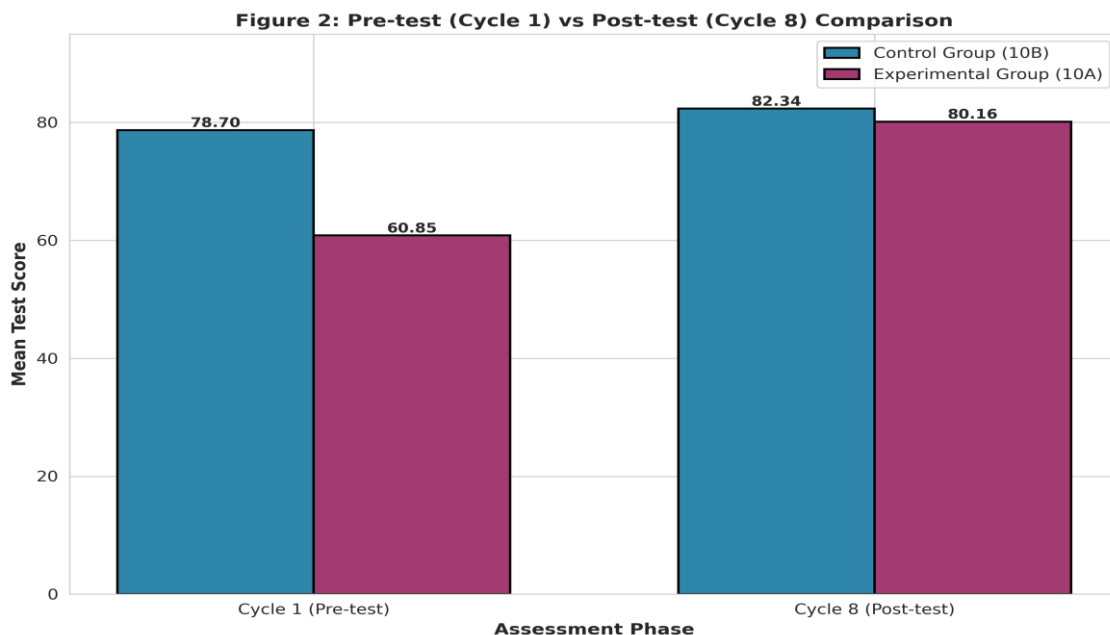


Figure 2: Pre-test (Cycle 1) vs Post-test (Cycle 8) Comparison

Figure 2: This bar chart provides a direct comparison of the mean test scores for both groups at the beginning (Cycle 1) and end (Cycle 8) of the study. It highlights the substantial improvement of the experimental group compared to the relatively stagnant performance of the control group.

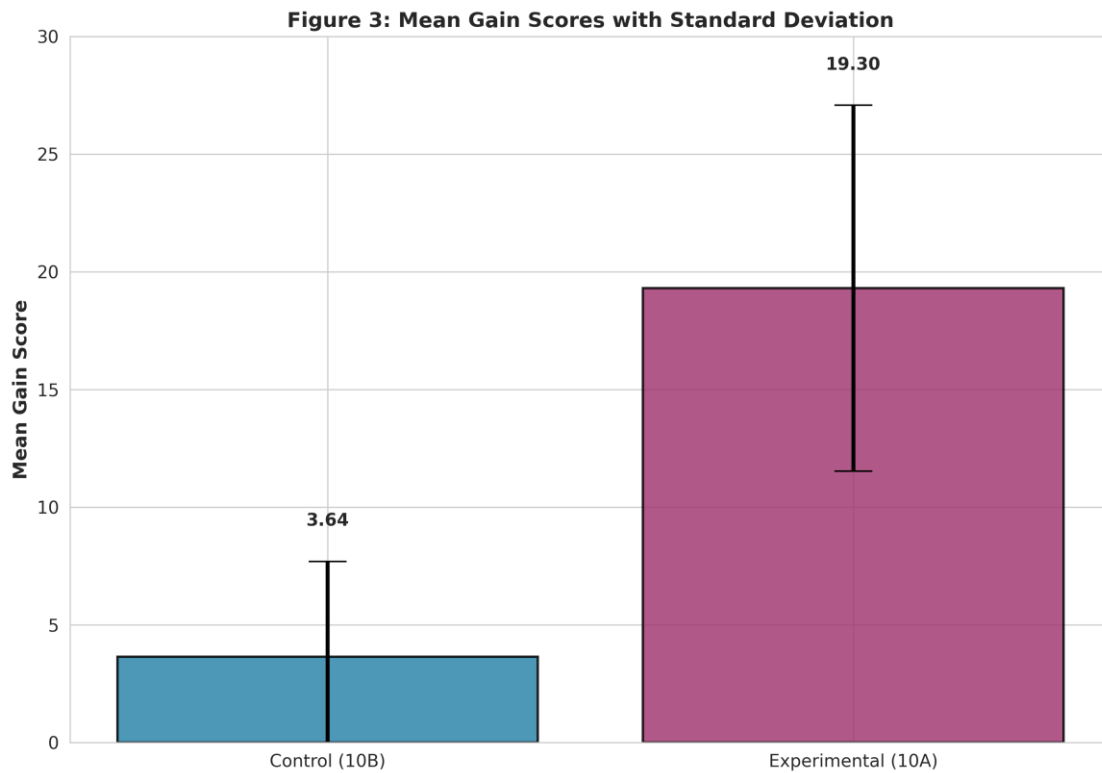


Figure 3: Mean Gain Scores with Standard Deviation

Figure 3: This bar chart compares the mean gain scores of the two groups, with error bars representing the standard deviation. The stark difference in the mean gain scores (19.30 for the experimental group vs. 3.64 for the control group) provides a powerful visual representation of the intervention’s impact.

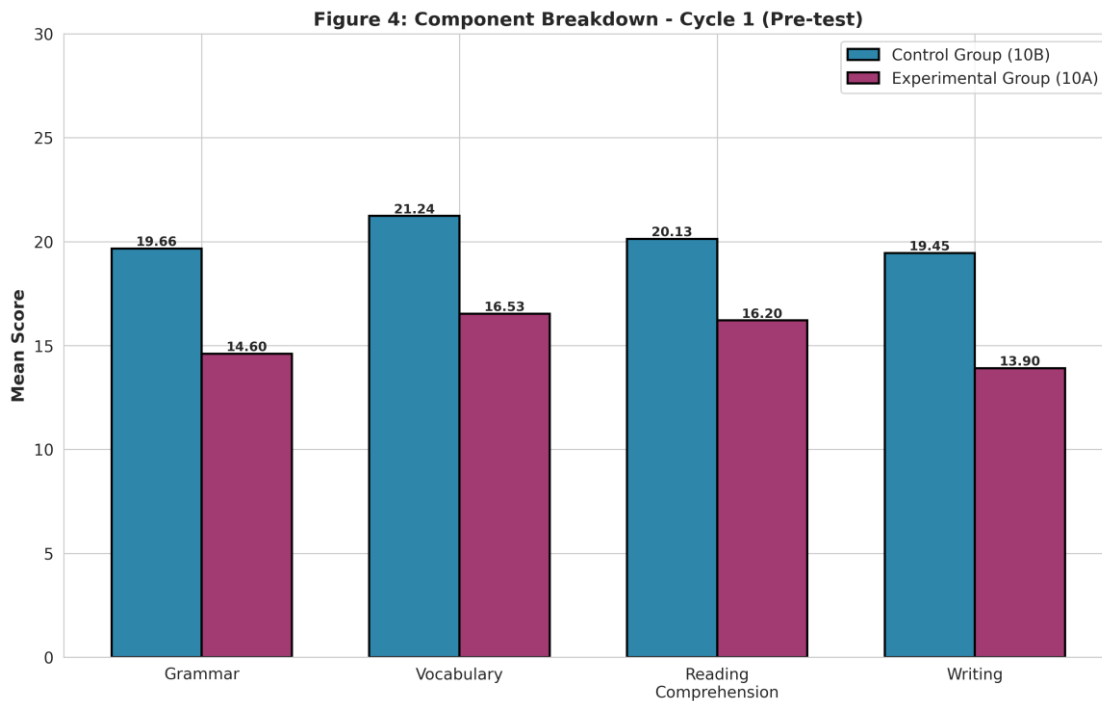


Figure 4: Component Breakdown - Cycle 1 (Pre-test)

Figure 4: This chart breaks down the pre-test scores into the four components of the English language proficiency test: grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing. It shows that the experimental group started at a lower level in all four areas compared to the control group.

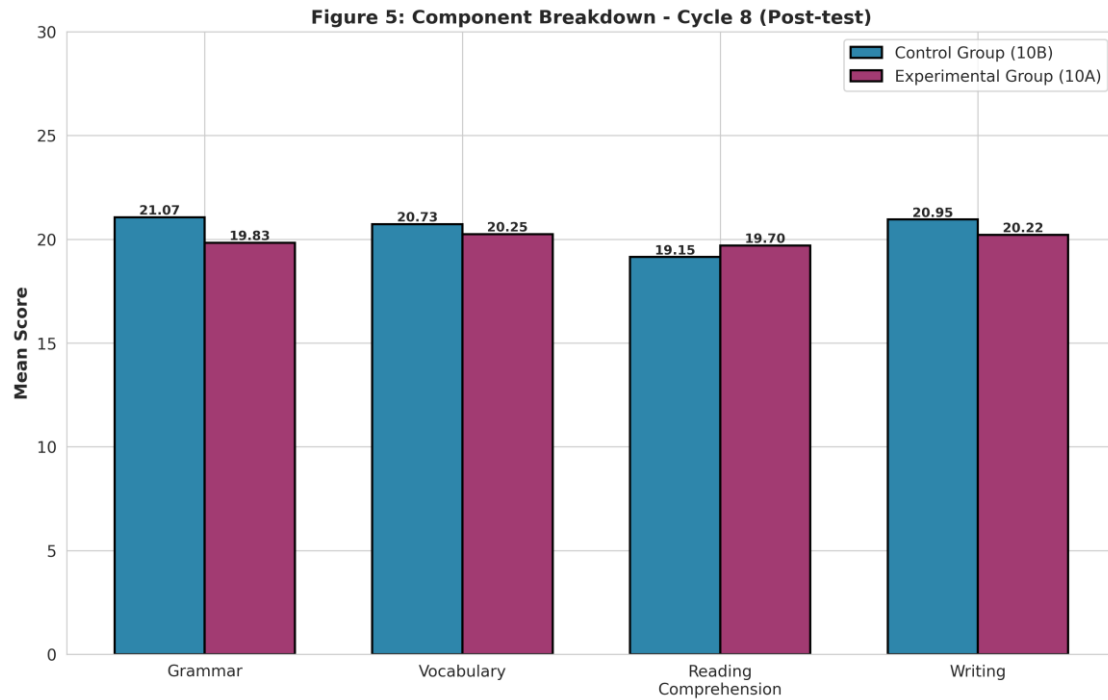


Figure 5: Component Breakdown - Cycle 8 (Post-test)

Figure 5: This chart depicts the component breakdown of the post-test scores. It demonstrates that the experimental group made significant gains in all four areas, particularly in grammar and writing, bringing their scores much closer to those of the control group.

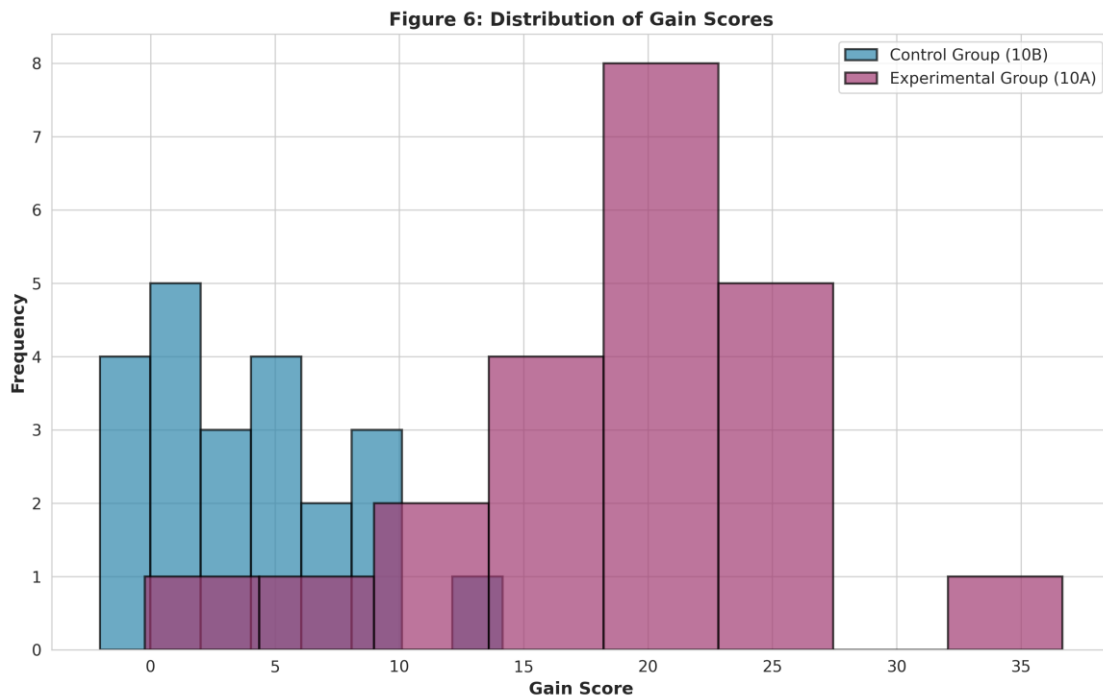


Figure 6: Distribution of Gain Scores

Figure 6: This histogram shows the distribution of gain scores for both groups. The distribution for the experimental group is shifted significantly to the right, indicating that a large majority of students in this

group experienced substantial gains in their English proficiency. In contrast, the distribution for the control group is centred around a much smaller gain.

The analysis of the cycle test data revealed a clear and statistically significant improvement in the English proficiency of the experimental group compared to the control group. As illustrated in Figure 1, the experimental group, which was subjected to the English-only intervention, demonstrated a remarkable catch-up in their test scores over the eight cycles of the study. While the control group showed minimal improvement, the experimental group's mean score increased from 60.85 in the pre-test to 80.16 in the post-test, a mean gain of 19.30 points. In contrast, the control group's mean score only increased from 78.70 to 82.34, a mean gain of just 3.64 points. This difference in gain scores was statistically significant ($t = 8.3754$, $p < 0.000001$), providing strong evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention.

Questionnaire Findings

In addition to the quantitative test data, a self-report questionnaire was administered to both groups to gather data on their attitudes towards English, the use of their mother tongue in and outside the classroom, and their perceptions of the learning environment. The questionnaire responses provided valuable insights into students' perceptions and experiences during the study.

The questionnaire results indicated that students in the experimental group reported a significant increase in their confidence when speaking English. Approximately 82% of students in the experimental group reported feeling more confident in using English for communication by the end of the study, compared to only 35% in the control group. This finding aligns with the quantitative improvement observed in the test scores.

Regarding mother tongue usage, 78% of experimental group students reported that they consciously reduced their reliance on their mother tongue during classroom activities, while only 22% of control group students reported similar reductions. This suggests that the intervention was effective in promoting English-only communication practices.

When asked about the effectiveness of the intervention strategies, 85% of experimental group students found the structured English-only zones helpful for their learning. Similarly, 79% appreciated the scaffolding and support provided by teachers, such as visual aids and simplified language. The collaborative learning activities were rated positively by 88% of students, indicating that peer interaction in English enhanced their learning experience.

Furthermore, 81% of experimental group students reported that they felt more motivated to learn English after the intervention, compared to 45% in the control group. This increase in motivation is a crucial factor in language acquisition, as it directly influences engagement and effort in learning.

These questionnaire findings complement the quantitative test results and provide evidence that the intervention not only improved English proficiency but also enhanced students' attitudes, confidence, and motivation towards English language learning.

Qualitative Findings

The interviews with students and teachers provided valuable context for the quantitative findings. The responses indicated a general consensus that while the mother tongue could be a useful tool for comprehension, its overuse was a significant barrier to English language acquisition. The teacher 1 commented that he tried to "articulate within my mind in my mother tongue first, and only then I put it into Hindi", highlighting the cognitive role of the mother tongue in language processing. However, he also cautioned that "100% freedom of mother tongue usage in learning the English language may not be so effective".

Participant 1's experience of translating from her mother tongue to write essays in English further supported the idea that the mother tongue can be a scaffold for language production. However, participant 2's argument for restricting the use of dialects in the classroom to encourage students to focus on learning English and Dzongkha provided a counterpoint, suggesting that an over-reliance on the mother tongue could lead to a lack of motivation to learn the target language. This aligns with the teacher 2's view that frequent use of the mother tongue "can become an obstacle to learning the English language effectively".

Conclusion

This action research study provided strong evidence that a structured intervention focused on creating an immersive English language environment can significantly improve the English language proficiency of Class Ten students. The quantitative data demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in the experimental group's test scores, while the qualitative data provided a nuanced understanding of the role of the mother tongue in the language learning process. The findings of this study have important implications for English language pedagogy in Bhutan and other similar contexts where students are learning English as a second language.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Teachers should be encouraged to create an immersive English language environment in their classroom, where English is the primary medium of communication.
- The use of the mother tongue should be strategic and limited, serving as a tool for comprehension rather than a crutch.
- Teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities to learn and implement effective scaffolding strategies to support students in an English-only environment.
- Further research should be conducted to explore the long-term effects of this intervention and to investigate the optimal balance between the use of the mother tongue and English in the classroom.

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