



Barriers to English Proficiency: Indigenous Students' Struggles at Private Universities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

English proficiency is crucial for academic and professional success, yet indigenous students in Bangladesh face significant challenges in acquiring the language at private universities. This study investigates the linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder their English learning through a survey-based approach, analyzing responses from students across different academic years. Findings indicate that limited early exposure to English, financial constraints, inadequate access to learning resources, and a lack of culturally inclusive teaching methodologies negatively impact their language development. Many students report low confidence in speaking and writing, restricted classroom participation, and feelings of cultural alienation, further impeding their proficiency. Statistical analysis highlights a strong correlation between prior English exposure and current language skills, emphasizing the importance of bilingual education and structured language support programs. To address these challenges, the study advocates for remedial English courses, peer-assisted learning, expanded digital resources, and faculty training in inclusive pedagogy. Additionally, scholarships and subsidized coaching programs are recommended to alleviate financial constraints that limit access to learning opportunities. Creating an inclusive academic environment requires universities to integrate indigenous cultural references into curricula, promote immersive English activities, and implement policies that prioritize linguistic diversity. By addressing these barriers through comprehensive language support and culturally sensitive interventions, institutions can significantly enhance indigenous students' English proficiency, ensuring greater academic success and long-term professional growth.

Keywords: English proficiency; Indigenous students; Linguistic barriers; Higher education; Inclusive pedagogy.

1. Introduction

English proficiency is a crucial academic and professional skill worldwide. In Bangladesh, English serves as an essential medium of instruction in higher education and plays a significant role in the job market. However, indigenous students at private universities in Bangladesh face multiple challenges in acquiring proficiency in English, limiting their academic success and future career prospects. One of the primary barriers to English proficiency among indigenous students is the lack of prior exposure to the language (syafriwana, 2023). Many indigenous students come from communities where Bengali is the second language, and English is rarely spoken. This limited exposure makes it difficult for them to transition to an English-medium academic environment at the university level. As a result, they struggle with reading comprehension, academic writing, and verbal communication. Socio-economic factors also play a crucial role in hindering English language acquisition. Many indigenous students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which restricts their access to quality education and additional language learning resources such as private tutoring, language courses, and digital learning tools. Additionally, financial constraints often force these students to work while studying, reducing the time they can dedicate to improving their English skills (Hannan et al., 2024).

Cultural barriers further complicate English language learning for indigenous students. Many indigenous communities have distinct cultural identities and linguistic traditions that differ significantly from mainstream Bangladeshi culture (Hossain, 2024). As a result, indigenous students may feel alienated in the university environment, where the dominant language and culture prevail. This cultural disconnect can lead to low self-confidence, hesitation in classroom participation, and difficulty in socializing with peers who are more fluent in English.

Institutional barriers, such as inadequate support systems in universities, also contribute to indigenous students' struggles (Aziz, 2022). Many private universities lack specialized language support programs tailored to the needs of indigenous students. Additionally, teaching methodologies may not be inclusive enough to accommodate students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Oxford & Skehan, 1990). The absence of culturally sensitive curricula and teaching practices can further marginalize indigenous students, making it even more challenging for them to improve their English proficiency.

Given these challenges, this study aims to identify the specific barriers that hinder indigenous students' English language learning at private universities in Bangladesh (Qader et al., 2023). Through a survey-based research approach, the study examines the linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and

institutional factors affecting their English proficiency. The findings will contribute to developing targeted strategies and recommendations to improve language learning support for indigenous students, ensuring their academic and professional success (Aziz, 2022).

2. Literature review

The acquisition of English as a second language is a widely studied area, particularly in contexts where English serves as the medium of instruction. Research indicates that English proficiency is a key determinant of academic success and career advancement, yet marginalized communities often struggle due to various socio-linguistic and institutional barriers. In Bangladesh, indigenous students attending private universities face compounded challenges that hinder their English language acquisition, stemming from linguistic interference, socio-economic constraints, cultural alienation, and inadequate institutional support. Several studies have examined the barriers to English proficiency among marginalized students, but only a few have specifically focused on indigenous students in Bangladesh.

Aziz (Aziz, 2022) highlighted how mother tongue interference significantly affects English learning, as indigenous students often struggle with phonetic differences and grammatical structures that do not exist in their native languages. Similarly, Hossain, M. (Hossain, 2024) examined code-switching among Bangladeshi students, finding that excessive reliance on the first language hampers English fluency. Karim et. al. (Karim & Mohamed, 2019) explored psychological barriers, revealing that language anxiety among indigenous students inhibits active participation in English classrooms.

Beyond linguistic difficulties, socio-economic factors play a critical role in shaping English language acquisition. Studies have shown that economic constraints limit access to quality language education, supplemental tutoring, and digital learning tools. Chakma et. al (Chakma, 2024) investigated socio-economic constraints affecting marginalized students' English proficiency, demonstrating that financial limitations restrict access to quality English instruction. Benson et. al. (Benson, 2002) further emphasized that indigenous students, due to their economic conditions, often lack exposure to supplementary English learning resources such as private coaching, digital learning platforms, and study materials. Additionally, Ahmed et. al. (Ahmed, 2024) reviewed the role of ICT in English learning for underprivileged students, concluding that limited technological access further exacerbates disparities in English proficiency.

Cultural influences also contribute to the barriers faced by indigenous students in English language learning. Yongo et. al. (Yongo et al., 2024) explored how indigenous students' cultural backgrounds impact English learning, finding that cultural differences create a sense of alienation, reducing confidence in using English. Chakma et. al. (Chakma, 2024) studied English language anxiety, revealing that indigenous students often feel inferior compared to their urban peers who have had greater exposure to English. Benson et. al. (Benson, 2002) analyzed the effects of motivation and self-efficacy on English proficiency, arguing that a culturally inclusive learning environment can significantly enhance language acquisition.

Institutional barriers further exacerbate the difficulties encountered by indigenous students in acquiring English proficiency. Many private universities in Bangladesh lack tailored language support programs that address the specific needs of indigenous learners. Syafrirwana et. al. (syafrirwana, 2023) highlighted the inadequacies in curricula that fail to accommodate the unique learning needs of indigenous students. Hannan et. al. (Hannan et al., 2024) examined institutional barriers such as the lack of specialized training for teachers in handling linguistically diverse classrooms. Hossain et. al. (Hossain, 2024) emphasized the role of teacher training, suggesting that equipping educators with culturally responsive teaching methodologies could significantly improve indigenous students' learning outcomes. Aziz et. al. (Aziz, 2022) explored bilingual education and its impact on indigenous students' English learning, advocating for a dual-language approach to bridge linguistic gaps.

Although previous studies have explored the impact of linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors on English proficiency, research focusing specifically on indigenous students in Bangladesh remains limited. Qader et. al. (Qader et al., 2023) examined policy interventions designed to improve English language learning among marginalized communities and recommended the implementation of targeted scholarships and community-based language programs. However, there is a lack of empirical research assessing the effectiveness of such interventions for indigenous students at private universities. Furthermore, while prior studies have examined these challenges in isolation, there is a gap in literature regarding the intersectionality of these factors and their combined impact on indigenous students' language learning experiences.

Given these gaps, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers that hinder English proficiency among indigenous students in private universities in Bangladesh. By utilizing primary data collection and statistical analysis, this research will contribute to the development of targeted policies and intervention strategies, ensuring that indigenous students receive the necessary support to improve their English language skills and succeed in higher education.

The figure number and caption should be typed below the illustration in 8 pt and left justified [*Note:* one-line captions of length less than column width (or full typesetting width or oblong) centered]. For more guidelines and information to help you submit high quality artwork please visit: <http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/authorsview.authors/authorartworkinstructions>. Artwork has no text along the side of it in the main body of the text. However, if two images fit next to each other, these may be placed next to each other to save space. For example, see Fig. 1.

3. Research methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to examine the barriers to English proficiency among indigenous students in private universities in Bangladesh. The research design is structured to capture the linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and institutional challenges these students face, providing both statistical analysis and contextual insights. A survey-based research method was

employed to collect primary data from indigenous students enrolled in private universities. A structured questionnaire was developed to gather quantitative data on students' English proficiency levels, access to learning resources, financial constraints, and perceptions of institutional support. Additionally, open-ended questions were included to capture qualitative responses, allowing students to elaborate on their personal experiences and challenges related to English language acquisition.

3.1 Data collection

The study targeted indigenous students from three private universities in Bangladesh. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that respondents belonged to indigenous communities, as their experiences are central to the research objectives. A total of 50 indigenous students participated in the study. The sample included students from various ethnic backgrounds to ensure diverse representation. Data was collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed both online and in-person. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions, Likert scale items, and open-ended questions. The survey covered key areas such as prior exposure to English, socio-economic background, availability of English learning resources, institutional support mechanisms, and cultural perceptions regarding English education.

3.2 Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Quantitative data was processed using Python 3.11.2 to generate frequency distributions and mean comparisons. These statistical methods helped identify the most prevalent barriers affecting English proficiency among indigenous students. In addition, qualitative responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to extract key patterns related to personal struggles, institutional shortcomings, and recommendations for improving language education.

3.3 Ethical considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would remain confidential and used solely for academic research purposes. Additionally, the study followed ethical guidelines in handling and analyzing sensitive data to avoid misrepresentation or bias.

4. Result and discussion

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

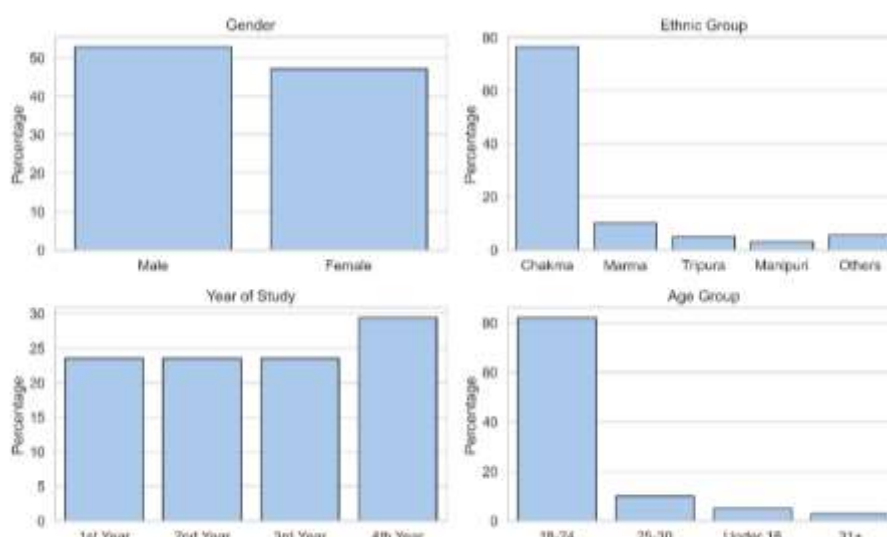


Fig. 1 - Demographic characteristics of participants.

The sample consisted of 52.9% male and 47.1% female respondents, representing a diverse range of indigenous communities presented in Figure-1. The Chakma ethnic group constituted the largest proportion (76.5%), followed by Marma (10%), Tripura (5%), Manipuri (3%), and other indigenous groups (5.5%). The distribution of students across academic years was relatively balanced, with 23.5% each in first, second, and third years, while 29.4% were in their final year. Age distribution indicates that the majority of students (82%) were between 18-24 years old, with smaller proportions in the 25-30 age group (10%), under 18 (5%), and 31 and above (3%).

4.2 Questionnaire analysis

The majority of respondents rated their English proficiency as comfortable (47.1%), with 29.4% remaining neutral, while 11.8% reported discomfort in using English. A smaller proportion (11.8%) rated themselves as very comfortable, and a negligible percentage expressed extreme difficulty. Figure 2 presents a grouped bar chart illustrating proficiency levels across different skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening). The data indicates that speaking and writing skills were rated lower compared to reading and listening, highlighting key areas where students require additional support.

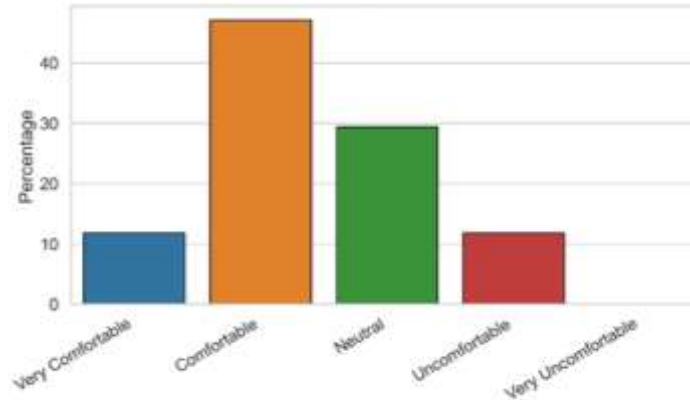


Fig. 2 - English language proficiency level.

When asked about the primary challenges faced while learning English, 35.3% of students identified vocabulary limitations as their biggest obstacle, followed by 23.5% citing a lack of speaking confidence. Other challenges included pronunciation difficulties (17.6%), grammar (11.8%), and writing skills (11.8%). The bar chart in Figure 3 visually represents these challenges, emphasizing that lexical and verbal proficiency are the most significant barriers. This suggests a need for targeted interventions focused on expanding students' vocabulary and enhancing their spoken English skills.

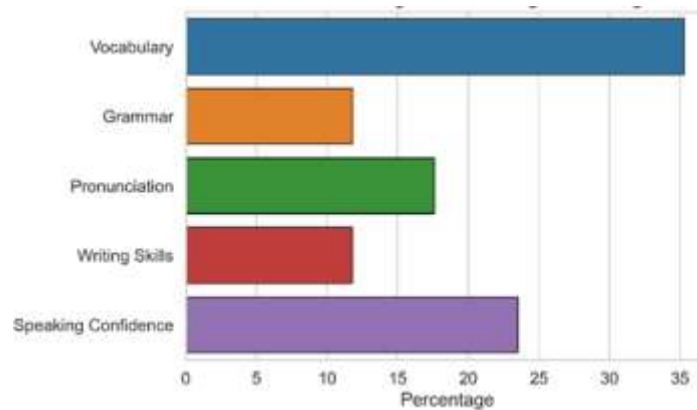


Fig. 3 - Challenge faced by participants while learning English.

A critical factor influencing English proficiency is students' access to learning materials. 41.2% of respondents reported adequate access, while 29.4% had no access, and 29.4% could only access resources sometimes. To illustrate this disparity, Figure 4 presents a grouped bar chart comparing students' resource access levels. The findings highlight the urgent need for expanded access to textbooks, digital learning platforms, and supplementary tutoring services.

Table 1 - Access to English Learning Resources.

Resource Access Level	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Yes	41.2
No	29.4
Sometimes	29.4

The frequency of English usage in daily life was also examined. The majority of students (52.9%) reported using English only occasionally, while 29.4% rarely used English. Only 17.6% of respondents reported using English very often, indicating limited opportunities for language practice. This is further illustrated in Figure 4, where the grouped bar chart emphasizes that English is predominantly used on a restricted basis. Low exposure to spoken English in daily interactions contributes to reduced confidence and fluency among indigenous students.

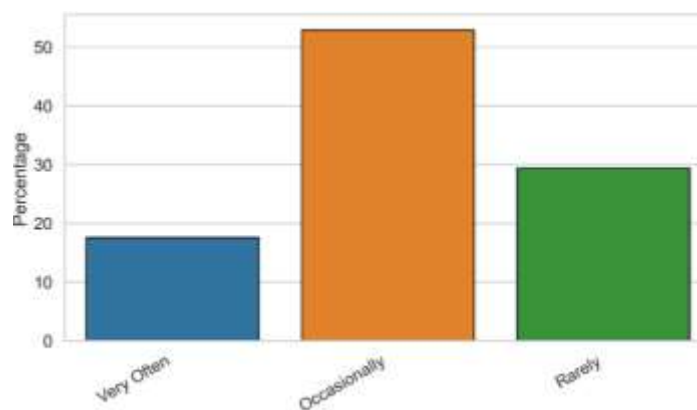


Fig. 4 - English Usage Frequency.

An important factor influencing English acquisition is the role of students' native languages. 64.7% of respondents perceived their native language as having a positive influence, facilitating English learning. However, 11.8% considered it a hindrance, and 23.5% were unsure. A diverging bar chart (Table 2) illustrates this finding, showing that while most students feel supported by their linguistic background, a significant minority experience interference. This supports the case for bilingual educational approaches that balance native language proficiency with English development.

Table 2 - Perceived Impact of Native Language on English Learning.

Perception of Native Language Influence	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Positively Affects Learning	64.7
Negatively Affects Learning	11.8
Unsure	23.5

Instructor support plays a crucial role in overcoming linguistic challenges. 76.5% of respondents found their instructors to be supportive, while 11.8% stated that instructors were unsupportive, and another 11.8% were uncertain. The bar plot in Figure 5 visualizes these responses, reinforcing the need for continued teacher training programs to enhance culturally responsive pedagogical approaches.

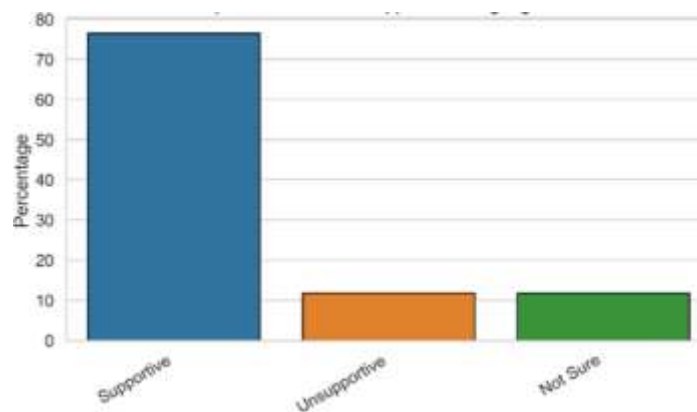


Fig. 5 - Perception of Instructor Support for Language Barriers.

Students were also asked about their ability to understand and participate in classroom discussions. 35.3% of respondents faced occasional difficulties, while 11.8% reported frequent struggles. Meanwhile, 23.5% rarely faced difficulties, and 29.4% never encountered challenges. Table 3 presents a stacked bar chart, highlighting that while many students have successfully adapted, a significant proportion still faces comprehension barriers.

Table 3 - Challenges in Understanding Classroom Content.

Frequency of Classroom Challenges	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Frequently	11.8
Occasionally	35.3
Rarely	23.5

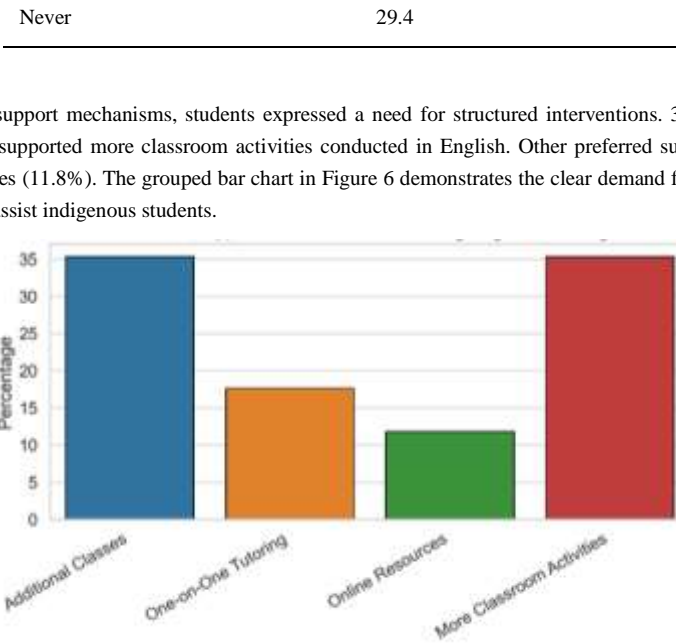


Fig. 6 - Preferred Support Methods for Overcoming English Challenges.

The extent to which students felt culturally respected in their learning environment was also assessed. 76.5% of respondents felt that their cultural identity was fully respected, while 17.6% reported partial respect. However, 5.9% stated that their culture was not respected, indicating that some indigenous students feel marginalized. A diverging bar chart (Figure 7) presents this data, emphasizing the need for greater cultural inclusivity in higher education institutions. While Table 4 presented a summary of the major barriers faced by indigenous students in acquiring English proficiency.

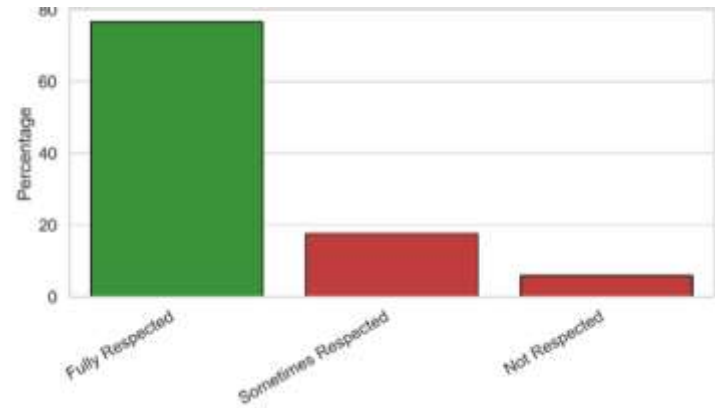


Fig. 7 - Perceived Cultural Respect in English Learning Environment.

Table 4 - Summary of Key Barriers to English Proficiency.

Barriers	Percentage respondent affected
Limited Vocabulary & Speaking Skills	58.8
Lack of Learning Resources	58.8
Low English Usage Frequency	58.882.3% (Occasionally/Rarely)
Limited Classroom Understanding	47.1% (Frequent/Occasional)
Perceived Lack of Cultural Respect	23.5

5. Findings and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that indigenous students at private universities in Bangladesh face substantial challenges in acquiring English proficiency due to linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers. Data analysis indicates that a majority of students struggle with English because of

their limited prior exposure, economic constraints restricting access to learning resources, and cultural differences that create social and academic alienation. Furthermore, institutional shortcomings such as the lack of language support programs and culturally inclusive curricula exacerbate these difficulties. Statistical analysis highlights that students with minimal English exposure in early education perform worse in university-level English courses, and those from lower-income backgrounds lack the financial means to enroll in supplementary language training. These insights underscore the pressing need for targeted interventions to support indigenous students in their English learning journey.

To address these issues, universities should implement comprehensive English language support programs, integrate culturally responsive teaching practices, and provide financial aid to economically disadvantaged students. Institutional reforms, such as specialized teacher training and mentorship initiatives, will also be crucial in fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. By addressing these barriers, private universities in Bangladesh can help indigenous students develop the English proficiency necessary for academic success and future career opportunities. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of inclusive educational policies and practices in ensuring equal learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their linguistic or socio-cultural backgrounds.

6. Recommendations

To enhance English proficiency among indigenous students, universities must implement structured language support programs that include remedial English courses, peer-assisted learning initiatives, and digital language labs. Expanding access to learning resources through subsidized textbooks, online platforms, and partnerships with language education providers is also essential. Encouraging frequent English usage in academic and social settings through discussion forums, debate clubs, and immersion programs will help students develop fluency. Additionally, faculty training in culturally responsive pedagogy should be prioritized, ensuring that instructors adopt bilingual teaching methods and incorporate culturally relevant materials to improve student engagement. Given the financial constraints many indigenous students face, targeted scholarships and subsidized coaching programs must be introduced. Universities should also foster collaborations with NGOs and government agencies to expand financial aid opportunities. Creating a culturally inclusive learning environment is crucial. This can be achieved by integrating indigenous cultural references into curricula, organizing cross-cultural exchange programs, and establishing student-led cultural forums. Institutional reforms should include the creation of language advisory centers and regular assessment of student needs to refine and improve existing support systems. By expanding resources, fostering immersive learning environments, training faculty, and ensuring cultural inclusivity, universities can bridge the English proficiency gap and empower indigenous students to succeed academically and professionally.

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Sample questionnaires for the survey of this research-

Demographic Information:

1. Age:

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-30
- ☐ 31 and above

2. Tribal/Ethnic Group:

- ☐ [Open response]

Questions:

1. How comfortable do you feel when using English for communication (speaking, writing, etc.)?

- ☐ Very comfortable
- ☐ Comfortable
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Uncomfortable
- ☐ Very uncomfortable

2. What are the most common challenges you face while learning or using English?

- ☐ Vocabulary

- ☐ Grammar
 - ☐ Pronunciation
 - ☐ Writing skills
 - ☐ Listening comprehension
 - ☐ Speaking confidence
 - ☐ Other (Please specify)
3. **Do you have access to English learning resources (books, online materials, tutors, etc.)?**
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Sometimes
4. **How often do you use English in your daily life or at school/university?**
- ☐ Very often
 - ☐ Occasionally
 - ☐ Rarely
 - ☐ Never
5. **In your opinion, how does your native language influence your ability to learn English?**
- ☐ Positively
 - ☐ Negatively
 - ☐ It does not influence
 - ☐ I am unsure
6. **Do you feel that your teachers or instructors understand the language barriers that you face?**
- ☐ Yes, they are supportive
 - ☐ Sometimes
 - ☐ No, they do not seem to understand
 - ☐ I am unsure
7. **Have you ever faced any challenges in understanding or participating in class due to language barriers?**
- ☐ Frequently
 - ☐ Occasionally
 - ☐ Rarely
 - ☐ Never
8. **What type of support would help you overcome the challenges you face with English?**
- ☐ Additional language classes
 - ☐ One-on-one tutoring
 - ☐ Online resources (videos, apps)
 - ☐ More classroom activities in English
 - ☐ Peer support
 - ☐ Other (Please specify)
9. **Do you feel that your cultural background and identity are respected when learning English?**
- ☐ Yes, fully respected

- Sometimes respected
- No, not respected
- I am unsure

10. **What suggestions do you have for improving English language education for indigenous students?**

- [Open response]

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