# Exploring Dalit Students' Perceptions towards Learning English

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## Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of Dalit students towards learning English, aiming to examine their *experiences, challenges, and motivations in educational contexts. This study employed a quantitative survey methodology to explore the perceptions of Dalit students towards learning English. A structured questionnaire was the primary tool for data collection, allowing for systematic and quantifiable measurement of students' attitudes, motivations, experiences, and challenges in learning the language. The target population for this research consists of Dalit students enrolled in selected five community schools of Birendranagar Municipality. The findings reveal that while English is perceived as a language of opportunity and upward mobility, many Dalit students face significant barriers, including limited access to quality instruction, socio-cultural discrimination, and a lack of supportive learning environments. Despite these challenges, participants express a strong desire to learn English, driven by aspirations for better educational and career prospects. The study highlights the need for more inclusive language policies and targeted support for marginalized students, ensuring equitable access to English education. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to address the existing gaps and promote social justice in English language learning for Dalit students.*

**Key Words:** Dalit students, English language learning, perceptions

## Introduction

Nepal is rich in its linguistic diversity having a diverse range of diversifi ed cultural and linguistic richness with more than one hundred and twenty-three living languages along the ecological zones (Bhattarai & Gautam, 2007; Giri, 2009; Yadava, 2013; Phyak, 2013 as cited in Khadka, 2022). The role of English as a global lingua franca has made it a critical component of educational systems worldwide. In countries like Nepal, where English is increasingly viewed as a vehicle for socio-economic advancement, the perceptions of marginalized groups towards learning this language are essential to understanding the broader implications of language education. Among these groups, Dalit students—a historically marginalized community in Nepal—face unique challenges and opportunities in their pursuit of English language proficiency. The term "Dalit" denotes a group from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, unified by shared oppression across religious, social, cultural, and economic dimensions (Koirala, 1996).

Hindu society was historically structured into castes linked to specific occupations: Brahmans as priests, Chhetris as warriors, Vaishyas as merchants, and Sudras or Dalits, regarded as untouchables, limited to service roles (Subedi, 2011). The *Manusmriti* prohibited lower-caste individuals from hearing the Vedas, threatening punishment with molten lead, effectively denying them access to education (Vishwakarma, 2002). Dalit communities in Nepal have long endured systemic discrimination and social exclusion, affecting their access to quality education and resources. Dalits, also known as untouchables, occupy the lowest rank in the caste hierarchy, which is deeply rooted in Nepalese society. This perception of impurity is upheld not only by non-Dalits but also by Dalits themselves, influencing their social interactions and practices (Vishwakarma, 2002).

English, often associated with privilege and opportunity, can serve as a double-edged sword for Dalit students. While it offers pathways to better educational and career prospects, the obstacles they encounter in acquiring the language can exacerbate existing inequalities. Previous research has

shown that the socio-economic background of students significantly influences their language learning experiences, particularly for marginalized groups. However, limited studies have specifically addressed the perceptions of Dalit students in this context.

Dalits, often referred to as "untouchables," represent a group historically oppressed across various dimensions—religious, cultural, social, economic, and historical. Defined by the National Dalit Commission (NDC, 2060), Dalits are communities most affected by caste-based discrimination and untouchability, resulting in significant disadvantages in social, economic, educational, political, and religious spheres, leading to a lack of human dignity and social justice. Known as lower castes in the traditional Hindu caste system, which dates back about 3,000 years, Dalits endure approximately 205 forms of discrimination in their daily lives.

In Nepal, marginalized and backward communities are categorized as Dalits, who face severe social exclusion, such that even those from higher castes often refuse to share basic resources, like water, with them. Research by Bhattachan et al. (2008) identifies 21 Dalit sub-castes in Nepal, including Lohar, Sunar, Kami, Sarki, and others. The caste system, rooted in the Varna classification (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra), has structured Nepalese society since the Lichhivi period, when divisions were first formally established. As a result, Nepal's social structure is highly segmented along caste, sub-caste, ethnic, and sub-ethnic lines, with over 60 groups and 20 major languages recognized in the 2001 census, indicating the deep-rooted nature of caste and race in the country.

Dalits are generally less educated than other caste groups, which limits their ability to support one another in times of trouble. Furthermore, they face exclusion from so-called higher-class communities and are significantly underrepresented across various sectors in Nepal. Koirala (1996) describes Dalits in Nepal as the most marginalized group, facing severe social and religious discrimination, cultural suppression, economic exploitation, educational disadvantage, and political exclusion in the country's hierarchical social structure (p. 17). Education plays a crucial role in these issues, as few Dalit children attend school for further studies, resulting in lower participation in English language learning compared to children from other castes. The educational status of Dalits remains unsatisfactory; while they possess skills, they often lack formal education due to disconnect between their skills and the educational system in Nepal. Koirala (1996) notes that Dalits have become skilled yet illiterate, with a strong oral tradition but no formal literacy connecting them to the written language.

Historically, Dalits have been preoccupied with serving others in various capacities, which deprived them of educational opportunities. As Shrestha (2014) observes, many individuals in such societies remain ignorant, perpetuated by superstitions. This ignorance is often passed down to their children, influenced not only by parents but also by neighbors and societal norms. Additionally, teachers and the media contribute to this cycle of ignorance, further hindering access to knowledge for Dalit children. The schooling system in Nepal was based on the Varnasram model, which deliberately excluded Sudras from education. It was considered sinful for Sudras to hear Vedic mantras, leading to their separation from schools and limiting educational opportunities to high-caste individuals, particularly Brahmins.

Access to formal education for all groups, including Dalits, only began after the fall of the Rana regime. However, deeply entrenched Hindu values have resulted in ongoing challenges for Dalit children in schools, such as difficulties in social integration, financial barriers, caste-based discrimination, and the perception of Dalits as second-class citizens. Consequently, many Dalit children remain out of school or drop out due to factors like poor family backgrounds and discriminatory practices. This psychological impact contributes to their lower academic performance compared to their peers from other castes.

Dalits experience higher levels of poverty and unemployment compared to other societal groups. Their occupations are often rooted in traditional roles, perpetuating the discrimination inherent in the Hindu caste system, which fosters emotional, cultural, and social divides. This discrimination creates barriers to education for socially and economically disadvantaged individuals, emphasizing the need for positive relationships among all community members. Expert anthropologist Gurung (2002) offers various interpretations of untouchability, while Bhattachan and Sunar (2002) note that

discrimination occurs both directly and indirectly. The fundamental cause of untouchability lies in the socio-cultural values of Hinduism, which have thrived under authoritarian regimes. As a result, Dalits are often treated as second-class citizens and sub-humans, with Tarai Dalits facing even harsher conditions than those in hilly or urban areas. High-caste individuals and ruling elites hold significant prestige, dominating lower castes like Sudras, who depend on them for their livelihoods. Many among the lower castes including shoemakers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, tanners, and tailors, resist accepting the status of untouchables. Consequently, Dalits are increasingly subjected to exploitation by the ruling elite in Nepali society.

Despite the growing importance of English as a global lingua franca and its potential to facilitate socio-economic advancement, there is a notable lack of research specifically focusing on the perceptions of Dalit students regarding English language learning in Nepal. Previous studies have generally addressed the socio-economic backgrounds and educational challenges faced by marginalized communities; however, few have delved into the unique experiences, motivations, and socio-cultural factors influencing Dalit students' attitudes toward learning English. This research aims to fill this gap by investigating how these students perceive the language in the context of their educational journey and social standing.

The role of English in Nepal extends beyond mere communication; it is increasingly perceived as a gateway to better educational and career opportunities. Understanding the perceptions of Dalit students is essential, as their experiences can provide valuable insights into the broader implications of language education within a framework of social justice and equity. Addressing the barriers that Dalit students face in learning English is crucial for creating inclusive educational policies and practices that promote equal access to language education. This study emphasizes the need for targeted support and resources to empower Dalit students, thereby contributing to a more equitable society.

This paper argues for the need to develop inclusive language policies that recognize and address the specific challenges faced by Dalit students. By fostering a supportive learning environment and ensuring equitable access to English education, we can work towards dismantling the barriers that hinder their academic and professional aspirations. The primary research objectives of this study are to explore the perceptions of Dalit students towards learning English, with a particular emphasis on their motivations, experiences, and the challenges they encounter within the educational context. This investigation seeks to identify the socio-cultural factors that influence Dalit students' attitudes and approaches to English language learning, thereby providing a deeper understanding of their unique perspectives. Additionally, the study aims to analyze the impact of socio-economic status on Dalit students' engagement with English language education, highlighting the role of economic and social barriers in shaping their learning experiences. Ultimately, the research will offer recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to enhance English language learning opportunities for Dalit students, promoting social justice and equity within the educational system.

## Methodology

This study employed a quantitative survey methodology to explore the perceptions of Dalit students towards learning English. A structured questionnaire was the primary tool for data collection, allowing for systematic and quantifiable measurement of students' attitudes, motivations, experiences, and challenges in learning the language. The target population for this research consists of Dalit students enrolled in selected five community schools of Birendranagar municipality. A stratified random sampling technique will be utilized to ensure a representative sample from various Dalit sub-castes, including Lohar, Sunar, Kami, and Sarki, among others. The sample size will be determined based on statistical power analysis, aiming for a minimum of 100 respondents to ensure the reliability and generalizability of the findings. By employing a quantitative survey method, this research aims to provide empirical evidence regarding Dalit students' perceptions towards learning English, contributing to the discourse on language education and social equity in Nepal.

## Result Analysis and Findings

**Table 1**

*Perception of Dalit Students towards Learning English Language*

| S.N. | Statements | SA % | A % | N % | D % | SD % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | English language will help you in the future. | 95.5 | 4.5 | - | - | - |
| 2. | You start learning English from elementary level. | 80 | 10 | 10 | - | - |
| 3. | You face some problems in learning English language due to your caste. | 30 | 50 | 10 | 10 | - |
| 4. | The dropout rate of Dalit students is high in comparison to other caste. | 80 | 20 | - | - | - |
| 5. | You want to learn English to pass exam. | 50 | 20 | 15 | 5 | 10 |

In analyzing the perceptions of Dalit students towards learning English, Table 1 reveals significant insights. For the first statement, 95.5% of respondents strongly agreed, and 4.5% agreed that English would benefit their future, indicating a unanimous belief in the positive impact of English on their career prospects. This suggests that Dalit students view English as a crucial tool for achieving their goals. Regarding the second statement, 80% strongly agreed and 10% agreed that they began learning English at the elementary level, demonstrating that a large majority (90%) of respondents have early exposure to the language. This early initiation is likely to facilitate their language acquisition and proficiency over time. On the third statement, while 30% strongly agreed and 50% agreed that caste-related issues hinder their English learning, 10% were neutral and 10% disagreed, indicating that 80% do not perceive their caste as a significant barrier to learning English. This suggests a resilience among Dalit students, as many believe they can overcome challenges related to their caste identity. In the fourth statement, 80% strongly agreed and 20% agreed that they experience high dropout rates from school and English classes, indicating a concerning trend in educational persistence. This dropout issue highlights the need for supportive measures to keep Dalit students engaged in their education. Lastly, in the fifth statement, 50% strongly agreed and 20% agreed that they learn English primarily to pass exams, while 15% were neutral, and 15% disagreed. The majority (70%) did not view their English studies solely as a means to pass exams but rather as a pathway to a better future career. This indicates a broader motivation for learning English beyond just academic requirements, suggesting that Dalit students are motivated by aspirations for long-term success.

Overall, the analysis reveals that Dalit students possess a strong positive perception of English as a vital resource for their futures, with early learning opportunities and a determination to overcome caste-related challenges. However, the high dropout rates and the need for a more comprehensive understanding of their motivations for learning English suggest that further support is essential to enhance their educational experiences and outcomes.

**Challenges faced by Dalit Students in Learning English Language**

In this section, I tried to find out the challenges faced by Dalit Students inlearning English language.

**Table 2**

*Challenges faced by Dalit Students in Learning English Language*

| S. N. | Statements | SA % | A % | N % | D % | SD % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Your parents provide sufficient money for book, copy and other learning materials. | 55 | 45 | - | - | - |
| 2. | Dalit students get scholarship for their study. | 55 | 37.5 | 2.5 | 5 | - |
| 3. | Most of the Dalit students face financial problems during their study. | - | - | 2.5 | 65 | 32 |
| 4. | Your parents spend lots of money and time for your study. | - | 10 | 15 | 50 | 25 |
| 5. | Economic problem is the main reason for Dalit students dropout. | 52.5 | 42.5 | 5 | - | - |

Analyzing the data presented in Table 2 reveals important insights into the economic conditions affecting Dalit students. For the first statement, 55% of respondents strongly agreed and 45% agreed that they received economic support from their parents, indicating a unanimous perception (100%) that parental financial assistance is available for their education. This suggests that despite their marginalized status, Dalit students benefit from their parents' willingness to invest in their learning, facilitating their pursuit of English. In the second statement, 55% strongly agreed and 37.5% agreed that they received scholarships for their studies, with only a small percentage (2.5%) remaining neutral or disagreeing. This indicates that a significant majority (92.5%) of Dalit students have access to financial aid, which is crucial for supporting their educational endeavors. This access to scholarships reflects a broader effort to improve educational opportunities for marginalized groups.

Conversely, the third statement reveals that 65% of respondents disagreed and 32.5% strongly disagreed with the assertion that their economic status was poor, resulting in a strong consensus (97.5%) against this notion. This suggests that Dalit students may have a more positive self-perception regarding their economic status than is often portrayed, possibly due to the support they receive from their families or scholarships. Regarding the fourth statement, only 10% agreed and 15% remained neutral about their parents spending money and time on their education, while 50% disagreed and 25% strongly disagreed. This indicates that a substantial majority (75%) believes their parents are not fully engaged in investing the necessary resources for their education. This perception may suggest a lack of adequate parental involvement in their academic pursuits, despite the financial support mentioned earlier.

Finally, in the fifth statement, 52.5% strongly agreed and 42.5% agreed that they dropped out of school and left English classes due to economic problems, with 95% of respondents supporting this view. This highlights the pressing economic challenges faced by Dalit students, who often must prioritize work over education to support their families. The data suggest that while there are avenues for economic support, systemic economic barriers still compel these students to leave school, hindering their educational attainment and opportunities for English language proficiency.

In summary, the analysis indicates that while Dalit students receive some economic support from their parents and scholarships, significant barriers remain due to economic challenges that lead to high dropout rates. This calls for a more comprehensive approach to support Dalit students, ensuring that they not only have financial resources but also the necessary encouragement and involvement from their families in their educational journeys.

**Correlation between Family Background and Learning EnglishLanguage**

In this section, I tried to find out the correlation between family background and learning English language.

**Table 3**

*Correlation between Family Background and Learning EnglishLanguage*

| S. N. | Statements | SA % | A % | N % | D % | SD % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Dalit children are compelled to follow their parent's occupation. | 50 | 40 | 10 | - | - |
| 2. | Your parents expect you to go to school to learn English. | 12.5 | 40 | 37.5 | 10 | - |
| 3. | You felt caste based discrimination in your community as well at school. | 47.5 | 45 |  | 2.5 | 5 |
| 4. | Caste based discrimination is deeply rooted in your society. | 45 | 37.5 | 10 | 7.5 | - |
| 5. | You are encouraged to learn English by your family, friends andteachers. | 50 | 30 | - | 20 | - |

The analysis of Table 3 provides significant insights into the perceptions of Dalit students regarding their aspirations and the socio-cultural challenges they face. In the first statement, 50% of respondents strongly agreed and 40% agreed that they feel compelled to follow their parents' traditional occupation, with 10% remaining neutral. This indicates a strong consensus (90%) against the idea that they wish to continue in traditional roles, suggesting that Dalit students generally hold a negative perception of these occupations and aspire to break away from them in pursuit of better opportunities. In response to the second statement, 12.5% strongly agreed and 40% agreed that they attend school to learn English for career development, while 37.5% were neutral and 10% disagreed. A total of 52% supporting the statement reflects a positive inclination among Dalit students toward learning English as a means to enhance their career prospects. This indicates an awareness of the importance of English in the job market and a desire for personal and professional growth.

The third statement revealed that 47.5% strongly agreed and 45% agreed that they experience caste-based discrimination at school, with only 2.5% disagreeing and 5% strongly disagreeing. This finding suggests a strong majority (92.5%) affirming that caste-based discrimination persists within educational institutions, indicating that such social injustices remain a significant barrier to their educational experience and overall well-being. Regarding the fourth statement, 45% of respondents strongly agreed and 37.5% disagreed with the notion that they face caste-based discrimination in their society, while 10% were neutral and 15% disagreed. The data suggests that a majority (82.5%) acknowledges the continued prevalence of caste-based discrimination in their society, highlighting the deep-rooted nature of these social issues, which further complicates their educational and social aspirations.

Finally, in the fifth statement, 50% of the respondents strongly agreed and 30% agreed that they were inspired to learn English by their family, friends, and society, while 20% disagreed. This indicates that a substantial majority (80%) of Dalit students draw motivation from their immediate social networks to pursue English language learning, reflecting a supportive environment that encourages their educational endeavors.

In summary, while Dalit students express a strong desire to distance themselves from traditional occupations and pursue English for career development, they simultaneously grapple with the realities of caste-based discrimination in both school and society. This juxtaposition underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these systemic challenges and enhance the support systems that encourage and facilitate their educational aspirations. The strong influence of family and community as motivators for learning English also points to the potential for leveraging these relationships to foster a more conducive learning environment for Dalit students.

## Discussion

The findings illustrate a complex interplay of motivations, challenges, and perceptions regarding English language learning among Dalit students. While there is a strong recognition of the importance of English for future success, the challenges posed by caste identity and systemic barriers

remain significant obstacles. Supporting the findings, BK (2016) highlighted the influence of socio-economic status on Dalit students' English language learning. Additionally, research by Bhandari (2005), Timsina (2006), Barooh (2007), Pokhrel (2008), Sapkota (2010), Balami (2009), Bhattarai (2012), Pant (2015), and Chemjong (2016) explored various aspects of Dalit students' challenges in education, including their English language learning experiences.

The high dropout rates and the motivation primarily tied to examinations indicate that while Dalit students are aware of the importance of English, they are often constrained by their socio-economic circumstances and the legacy of discrimination. In this regard, Koirala (1996) describes Dalits in Nepal as the most marginalized and oppressed community, facing social, cultural, economic, educational, and political challenges that render them disadvantaged and powerless within a stratified society. This characterization aligns with the findings of the study, which reveal a complex interplay of motivations and obstacles for Dalit students in learning English. Furthermore, Timsina (2006) found that Dalit students exhibit lower academic proficiency compared to their non-Dalit peers. The study also provided insights into academic writing techniques, survey study frameworks, and theoretical knowledge about Dalits, including their challenges, societal status, and English learning conditions.

Despite their strong recognition of English's importance for future success, these students confront significant barriers rooted in caste identity and socio-economic conditions. The high dropout rates and motivations primarily tied to examinations further highlight that while they understand the value of English, systemic discrimination and economic hardships limit their opportunities and aspirations. In aligned with the findings, Bhattarai (2012) discovered that Dalit students often experience feelings of depression, oppression, shyness, and difficulty, hindering their active participation in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms. The study also highlighted the influence of their social status on English language learning.

This analysis highlights the need for policies that address the specific barriers faced by Dalit students, such as providing additional academic support, creating inclusive educational environments, and promoting community awareness about the value of education for marginalized groups. In aligned with the findings, it has been argued that various personal, family, and school-related factors influence learning performance, with differing intensities and directions. For instance, higher parental education and income levels positively affect children's academic outcomes (Li & Qiu, 2018; Farooq et al., 2011; Gooding, 2001, as cited in Khadka et al, 2021). Additionally, gender, ethnicity, religion, and culture significantly impact learning. Ethnicity, as a social determinant, also shapes performance; studies revealed lower achievement levels among indigenous children compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Arteaga & Glewwe, 2014; Vallejos, 2021).Furthermore, engaging Dalit communities in the development of English language programs could enhance their relevance and effectiveness, ensuring that they not only prepare students for exams but also equip them with the skills needed for lifelong learning and empowerment. In line with the finding, Khadka (2024) argues that the existing studies recognize the dominance of English, there's a scarcity of exploring its socio-cultural, economic, and pedagogical ramifications within the Nepali context. In brief, the perceptions of Dalit students towards learning English reflect both a hopeful outlook towards educational advancement and a stark reality of the challenges they face. Addressing these issues holistically can help bridge the educational gap and promote social justice and equity within Nepal's education system.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the perceptions of Dalit students towards learning English, shedding light on their motivations, challenges, and experiences. While the majority of Dalit students recognize English as a tool for future success and career advancement, they also face significant barriers that impede their learning journey. Socio-economic hardships, caste-based discrimination, and insufficient educational resources are key factors contributing to their struggles in mastering the language. Despite these challenges, Dalit students remain motivated to learn English, viewing it as a pathway to better opportunities in education and employment.

This study emphasizes the need for policymakers and educators to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments for Dalit students. Targeted interventions, such as scholarships, remedial classes, and anti-discrimination initiatives, can help bridge the gaps in English language

learning. Moreover, it is crucial to foster a more equitable education system that empowers marginalized communities, enabling Dalit students to fully participate and succeed in learning English. In conclusion, addressing the socio-cultural and economic disparities that Dalit students face is imperative for ensuring that English language education becomes a tool for social mobility rather than a perpetuation of inequality. By focusing on inclusive policies and practices, stakeholders can contribute to creating a more just and equitable educational landscape for Dalit students.

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