



Journal of Education and Learning Research

Journal homepage: <https://jelr.greadc.org/index.php/jelr>

JELR
Journal of Education and Learning Research
E-ISSN
3024-9589

Early Childhood ESL Learning in Dhaka and Kolkata: Analyzing Public Primary Schools' Learning Environments and Learning Strategies of Pupils

Probal Roy Chowdhury*

Doctoral Researcher, Department of English Studies, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria, 0003, Republic of South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 29 June 2025

Revised: 04 July 2025

Accepted: 08 July 2025

Published online: 10 Aug 2025

Keywords:

ESL: English as a Second Language

ECE: Early Childhood Education

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

* Corresponding author.

E-mail: 64088464@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Article Doi

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.62208/jelr.3.1.p.1-12>

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](#) license.



ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the findings of an international comparative research conducted in the cities of Dhaka (Bangladesh) and Kolkata (India), in the field of early childhood ESL learning. It specifically focuses on language learning environments and ESL learning strategies used by the pupils of public primary schools. Both the cities are situated in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent and belonged to the same province and country before the partition of India in 1947, sharing Bengali as a common first language. Many public primary schools in both the cities offer English only as a second language to pupils. School-attending early childhood learners are addressed as pupils interchangeably throughout this article. Using qualitative methodology, it is found that infrastructural problems and the absence of advanced ESL teaching techniques in public primary classrooms persist in both the cities. Distrust between guardians and teachers adversely affects pupils' ESL learning in both the cities. Learning environments of both the cities fail to motivate early childhood ESL learners. Over-dependence on memory-related strategies to learn ESL among the pupils is also observed. Learning L1 (Bengali) and L2 (English) at the same time, especially in a classroom setting, creates problems for some pupils. It is discovered comparatively that in a formal learning environment all skills related to and aspects of early childhood ESL learning are not paid equal amount of attention.

1. Introduction

As English became a global language, the demand to study it from an early childhood period increased multiple folds. Schools are the best places for early childhood learners to learn English other than home.

When one or multiple languages are spoken at home, other than English, the learning environments of schools become even more important (Hashim & Yunus, 2018). At the same time, whether at home or at school, Gonzalez (2022) as per her experience points out, "It's important for multilingual students to

feel that their first language is valuable, seen as an asset, and a welcome part of their identity.” American University’s School of Education (2023) published that the rise of English learners in classrooms is not always directly proportional to the rise of skilled English teachers. Martirena (2025) in her practice observed that due to the pressure of learning English ‘swift and early’ educators often obsess with the idea of creating a ‘perfect learning environment’ as per their own point of views. She further observed that many educators are moving away from chasing ‘perfection’ to create a dynamic, joyful and motivating pupil-centric learning environment through project-based learning.

The main focus of those learning environments is to provide spaces to pupils where they can express themselves both verbally and non-verbally with confidence. Through her practice, Gonzalez (2022) noticed that young English learners are often taught to focus singularly on English in order to learn it and grasp basic English skills first in order to understand academic content. She experienced that many-a-times teachers enter the classrooms with preconceived notions that pupils who do not use English as their home language are disadvantaged in classrooms and every task needs to be translated to the early childhood learners.

Ellström, Ekholm and Ellström (2008) proposed to evaluate learning environments either as ‘adaptive’ or ‘reproductive’ on one hand, and ‘innovative’ or ‘developmental’ on the other. In the ‘adaptive’ or ‘reproductive’ type of learning environment a learner learns a subject in accordance with the structure and curriculum set by the institution. In the ‘innovative’ or ‘developmental’ type of learning environment learners go beyond a set curriculum and chart their own ways to learn a subject by questioning set definitions and self-actualising the realms of understanding it proposes. Hyppia, Sointu, Hirsto and Valtonen (2019) identified two models of analysing learning models.

Researchers like Manninen, Burman, Koivunen, Kuittinen, Luukannel, Passi and Särkkä came up with one model of analysis of learning environments depending upon five different perspectives. Hyppia et al. (2019) cite them as, “pedagogical approaches, social and collaborative aspects, physical spaces, technologies used, and off-campus settings for contextual learning (e.g., museums as a place for inquiry and learning)”. Another model, a three-dimensional approach to analyse learning environment was introduced by Q. Wang which mainly focused on three things, pedagogy, social interaction and technology. Wang introduced the model in 2008

(Hyppia et al., 2019). In order to better understand learning environments in simple terms, Western Governors University published an article in 2024 categorizing learning environments in three different ‘landscapes’. First, comes the physical learning landscape, it encompasses all the possible tangible aspects of a learning environment. After the outbreak of Covid-19, a physical learning landscape is not judged by the classroom environment alone. Due to the inclusion of distance and digital education even in the elementary education sector, analysis of learning environments has extended to homes and satellite learning centres. Second, a psychological learning landscape is judged on how learners engage with the curriculum. Trust and communication between teachers and students are two of the most important aspects in judging a psychological learning landscape. Third, an emotional landscape is termed positive if the learners’ learning experience is more or less stress-free and they are encouraged to express their emotions freely. As per the recent trend, more and more analysts are focusing on schools’ capabilities to enhance learners’ emotional intelligence level right from their early childhood period (Lee, 2024). Cadierno, Hansen and Munoz (2024) have stated that anxiety, mostly driven by fear and apprehension, pose detrimental effects on L2 learners.

According to Ozerem and Akkoyunlu (2015), in a world where there is a rising demand of learner-centred learning environment, there is a need for analysing the effectivity of learning environments depending upon how efficient they are in delivering important lessons as per the learning styles of the learners. Apart from learning styles, learning strategies also play an important role in setting the dynamics of a learning environment. Learning style is interchangeably used with “cognitive style, sensory style and preference style” (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer & Bjork, 2008; Awla, 2014). Learning styles refer to the natural forces at work for classifying, managing, or refuting the incoming information. Whereas, learning strategies essentially signify precise happenings a pupil takes up or approaches one uses to learn (Leaver, Ehrman & Shekhtman, 2005; Díaz-Granados, Dominguez, Ricardo, Ballesteros & Fontalvo, 2020).

The learning styles of early-childhood learners those that have been identified so far starts with visual or spatial style where an early childhood ESL learner, acquires more information when it is produced for the ‘eyes’, for example through pictures, cartoons, charts, diagrams, videos, films etc. Rather than listening and speaking a pupil might be more interested in reading and writing. Followed by that comes the auditory style, where an early childhood ESL learner acquires

more information when it is produced for the 'ears'. Such a pupil can be a good listener. He or she might be most comfortable in gathering information through dialogues and discussions. What is said, in which tone, where it is said and how many times it has been said, influence their ESL learning journey. The third style is called the kinesthetic or tactile style, where an ESL learner receives knowledge and enriches himself through physical activities and using their sense of touch. Fourth comes the social or interpersonal style. It is visible that some ESL learners get bored and quickly become unmotivated when left alone to study. These learners from a very young age show tendencies to excel in their ESL study when left with an active, accepting and positive peer group. This style of learning is called social or interpersonal style of learning. On the opposite spectrum, in the individualist or intrapersonal style of learning the ESL learner thrives in relative isolation. Privacy and less distractions become necessary for them to concentrate on their lessons. Lastly, some ESL learners use the verbal or linguistic style of learning. It is observed that for such learners, without clear communication from their teachers, peers, or guardians, whether spoken or written, they find it difficult to grasp or retain knowledge (Awla, [2014](#); Salam, Sukarti & Arifin, [2020](#)).

Whereas, the following learning strategies used by learners around the globe in classroom settings have been recorded (Likitrattanaporn, [2018](#); Namaziandost & Ziafar, [2020](#)):

- (i) In ESL classrooms, reasoning, analysis, recording or note-taking, synthesising, organising and reorganising the received information, is put into effect synchronously by pupils who use cognitive strategies of learning.
- (ii) A learner who uses the meta-cognitive strategies, can only learn after examining his own fortes, feebleness and wants.
- (iii) Competence in the second language can also be gained using one's own emotions and softer feelings in a positive manner, rather than reason and logic. Some learners do so by using affective strategies.
- (iv) Learners who depend on rote learning to learn a second language are often identified as employers of memory-related strategies of learning.
- (v) When a learner learns something taking clues and hints from the happenings of his immediate surrounding, the phenomenon is identified as the

usage of compensatory strategies of learning. Using such strategies, a learner can absorb knowledge more from how it is presented rather than going through what it actually is at an individual level.

- (vi) Lastly, learners who put a lot of emphasis on communication with teachers, peers, parents or other elders to develop their language skills, are often identified as social strategy users.

Luoto ([2023](#)) concluded that most research in comparative education which focuses on teaching quality and effectiveness seldom provides adequate attention to classroom, school and regional contexts, let alone learning and strategies used for learning.

Background History

Both the cities of Dhaka and Kolkata are situated in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, with the same lingua franca, Bengali. They have shared a common history since the Mughal rule in India, through the rule of East India Company till the British Raj (Seth, [2017](#)). The status of ESL planning, policymaking and learning after the British left India in 1947, are analysed in two parts. One period is the period between 1947-1971 when Pakistan was created, and is called the post-colonial period. The second period which started in 1971, when Bangladesh got liberated from Pakistan, and continues still to this day is called the post-liberation period (Islam & Hashim, [2019](#)).

When the British forces first arrived in India, they identified three systems of education prevailing in undivided India, namely Aryan, Dravidian and Muslim. Later, mainly the Christian missionaries initiated the spread of English in the sphere of education (Islam & Hashim, [2019](#)). Since then, religion has played a very significant part in the realm of education, especially in Dhaka. Even though in the field of primary education the net enrolment rate since 2015 has been almost 'universal', reading and comprehension still remains two of the major issues in the primary school environment (Roy, Haq & Rob, [2020](#)). Khan ([2015](#)) has also pointed out that the dire position of Dhaka in the 'Global Liveability Index' also raises the question of health and mental well-being of its residents, including pupils. He also pointed out that traffic congestion and safety for women had been a persistent concern in Dhaka. It can also translate into social and infrastructural limitations in early childhood learning in Dhaka. But due to the emphasis put on English learning both from the macro- to the micro-level initiatives ESL has become a field of increased interest in the recent past. Macro-level

initiatives are initiated by the government and micro-level initiatives are initiated mainly at family and locality level (Basu, [2016](#)). Moreover, it is seen that English was taught as a compulsory subject in Dhaka even during the Pakistani rule. After the liberation of Bangladesh, with Dhaka becoming the national capital, the status quo of ESL learning remained unchanged. Only religious sentiments during Pakistan's rule over Bangladesh and 'ethno-linguistic' nationalistic sentiments after the creation of Bangladesh influenced the ESL learning environments from time to time (Islam & Hashim, [2019](#)).

After the partition of India, almost in every region of India there was a feeling that after the British leaves India, continuation of English learning in India would vehemently harm the 'national spirit' and propagate 'slave mentality' introduced in the colonial times. But unable to deny the need for English in India (including Kolkata), English grew to be seen as a link language both within and outside India (Dey, [2020](#)). This was not the case in Dhaka. English is often seen as a foreign language, required for international communication, but not a 'link language' as such (Hoque, [2008](#); Seoane & Suarez-Gomez, [2023](#)). Unlike India, Bangladesh has faced colonialism twice, once during the British rule and later the during Pakistani rule. The 'national spirit' of Bangladesh often skews the status of English both in education and normal day-to-day conversations (Rahman, [2019](#)). Thus, English is often seen as a direct threat to Bengali language or culture in Dhaka (Basu, [2016](#)).

During the time of colonisation of India, the British built the city of Kolkata (which falls in the modern-day West Bengal State of India) and declared it the then national capital of India. As British power expanded politically and culturally, they established their administration with English as the main medium of communication for administrative affairs. Christian missionaries from Europe had already established schools for the early childhood learners, where they can learn English. As Kolkata gained prominence in the field of political and economic power, European philosophies and languages, especially English language and the British thoughts swiftly started penetrating in the cultural landscape of Kolkata (Seoane & Suarez-Gomez, [2023](#)). English, including Kolkata since then, has become a symbol of aspiration among young Indians. Still in the Bengali-speaking society of Kolkata ESL learning environment is often described as 'input-poor'. That is because English for the larger section of the society still plays a negligible role in social interactions outside classrooms. Even after the introduction of English from the early childhood period, neither the ESL periods in schools

nor the ESL syllabus framed communicate to the needs of ESL learners (Bhattacharya, [2017](#)). Moreover, Khan ([2015](#)) stated that during the 1970s, traffic congestions, pollution and frequent load-sheddings used to impact all aspects of life. This could often translate into infrastructural limitations for ESL learning in the public primary classrooms.

On the other hand, experts fail to recognize that for Bengali-speaking pupils whether in Dhaka or Kolkata, learning Bengali and English at the same time might give rise to various problems. Though both the languages belong to the same Proto-Indo-European group of languages, both of them have gone through various other influences and have developed into two completely different languages (Farzana, [2021](#)).

Research Objective

The research objective of this study is to explore the prevailing ESL learning environments in the public primary schools of Dhaka and Kolkata and the learning strategies employed by the pupils to learn ESL in those environments comparatively.

2. Methodology

Presentation of mere numerical data points and intervening or introducing straight-forward treatments for one or multiple specific research problems are not the main aims of this research. That is why this research has chosen a qualitative methodology (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, [2022](#)). Though research questions in qualitative research often starts with 'how' and 'why', and is often seen to compete against quantitative research, they can neither be seen as direct opposites, nor incompatible or mutually exclusive. Qualitative research can either generate hypothesis which would be open to further quantitative reasoning in order to be either accepted or rejected, or deepen the understanding of quantitative data already gathered in a specific context (Tenny et al., [2022](#)).

That is why in this research three instruments were used to gather data, namely unstructured interviews, survey questionnaires and non-participatory observations. Among the three research instruments, survey questionnaire is often associated with quantitative research. But applying Tenny et al.'s ([2022](#)) observation on qualitative-quantitative relationship survey questionnaire has been included in this qualitative research. This research focused on learning rather than teaching and education. The researcher tried to put a foundational step in the development of ESL learning in Dhaka and Kolkata as

a stand-alone research discipline. As identification of variables and generation of hypotheses are important in this research, so exploratory research design was chosen due to its adaptability and flexibility. The data from the participants are expected to contribute new knowledge in the field (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019; Stewart, [n.d.](#)).

In this research an exploratory case study design has been employed to discover the dynamics of the early childhood ESL learning environments and learning strategies used by pupils to learn ESL. Case study strategy was selected because it can be used in both qualitative and quantitative research and provides deep exploration of the evolution of a single incident, one or a group of individuals, or one or multiple prevailing conditions over a certain period in a real-world scenario. It is often put into use in the field of education, and this research has been designed as a comparative case study, where the data from Dhaka and Kolkata was collected and analysed cross-sectionally (Oranga & Matere, [2023](#)).

Lim ([2024](#)) stated that as qualitative research does not aim at merely quantifying frequencies it is often viewed as constructive and interpretive. The research paradigms chosen of this research are interpretivism and the critical research paradigm. Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger ([2020](#)) and Oranga and Matere ([2023](#)) stated that in order to maintain the richness of information gathered during a qualitative research purposive sampling is preferred. It is because the process of data collection and analysis continues until no new information is generated (Busetto et al., [2020](#)). Thus, in this research, within the class of non-probability sampling, purposive judgemental sampling, convenience and quota sampling has been used to select the participants.

Setting of the samples, data collection and analysis

The setting of this research is in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. The cities of Dhaka and Kolkata were selected for this research. Both the cities share the same 1st language and belonged to the same province during the colonial era in undivided India. The whole research population was the one which directly or indirectly dealt with early childhood ESL learning in public primary schools of both the cities in Bangladesh and modern India respectively. The Cochran's principle was used to get the exact sample size from which the data was to be collected. The required sample size was 568, the calculation is presented below:

$$\text{Sample Size} = Z^2 pq / e^2$$

Here, Z is the Z-value that is calculated from "Confidence Level". Here, the "Confidence Level" is taken 95% and the Z-value is 1.96.

Here, "e" is the margin of error. The margin of error considered by the researcher is 5% or 0.05.

The "p" is the proportion of an estimated characteristic that exists in the population and "q" is "1-p" (Israel, [1992](#)).

Putting the formula into use we get a sample size of:
 $(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times 1 - 0.5 / (0.05)^2 = 568.32$

The researcher initially planned to collect data from 620 individuals. Among the 620, 20 people (10 from each city) from various professional fields like academia, journalism, education, cultural and social work, were to be interviewed on the present condition of early childhood ESL learning in public primary schools. 300 teachers (150 from each city) who have some experience in early childhood ESL teaching, and 300 (150 from each city) early childhood ESL learners or pupils from 8 public primary schools (4 from each city), between the ages of 6-9, were selected for gathering data through survey questionnaires. The ESL learners were ought to be present with at least one guardian for the survey. Due to the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the sample size of the early childhood ESL learners could not be met. The overall sample size was revised to 538, with 20 (10 from each city) interviewees, 300 teachers (150 from each city) and 218 (109 from each city) early childhood ESL learners or pupils. Data received from all the samples were then triangulated and analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen mainly to easily achieve coding, categorising and finally creating themes from all the triangulated data (Alhojailan, [2012](#)). The triangulation of the data helped to strengthen the trustworthiness of the data collected for this qualitative study.

Limitations

The data collection and analysis process for this research was concluded in 2022. The data collection process was delayed due to the sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Travelling within and in between Dhaka and Kolkata was restricted till early 2022. Depending upon location and time setting outcomes of similar research on early childhood ESL learning in public primary schools might vary. The respondents who have taken part in this research might change their opinion over time, which the researcher would have no control over. Moreover, the researcher had permissions to collect data from pupils through survey questionnaires from only four public primary schools in each city. Though the researcher took adequate steps in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19 virus

in the physical setting, where data was to be collected through survey questionnaires, still the pupil strength which appeared on the day of data collection was much less than desired in each city. Pupils being

under-aged respondents also had either one guardian or a school teacher to assist while responding to the questions framed. It was observed that teachers in Kolkata left more questions in the survey unanswered.

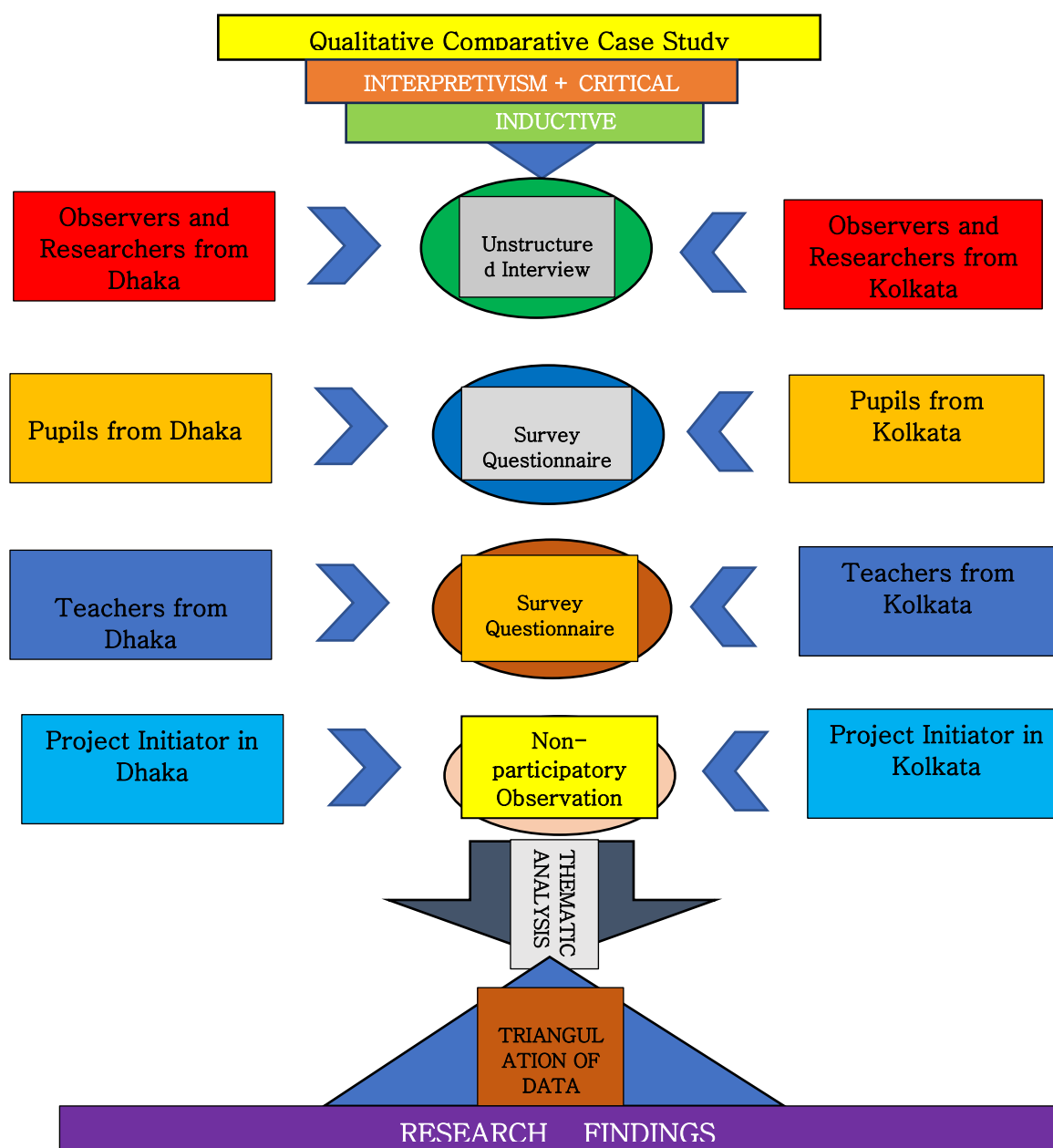


Figure 1. Diagrammatic Representation of the whole Research Process

3. Results and Discussions

Theme 1: Priorities in overall policymaking, and its impact on early childhood ESL learning.

It was found that after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the main aim of policymakers and administrators in Dhaka was to formulate and implement policies to meet the bare minimum needs of the general population, that is food, clothing and shelter. Education policy (including early childhood

ESL learning policy), public health and hygiene policy took a backseat.

Though Chandan (2023) and Akhter (2024) observed the authorities in Dhaka invested more capital in 'aesthetic' reconstruction of public primary schools, compared to Kolkata, the outcomes of such efforts on early childhood ESL learning policy requires further research to surface.

In Kolkata, the importance of educational policymaking was recognized, but was used to achieve political and socio-economic goals. This inversely affected early childhood ESL learning in public primary classrooms. Sarkar (2018) observed that categorisation of everything associated with education, starting from early childhood period, as per political lines, is a continuing trend in Kolkata.

Theme 2: Positioning of English in two non-native linguistically diverse cities, sharing the same lingua franca while dealing with the absence of indigenous education systems.

It was found that in both the cities ESL learning systems are still initiated as per designs constructed by the former British rulers. Neither has there been any success in reviving pre-British era language learning models nor in adoption of completely new ones even after multiple discourses spanning through decades. Moreover, an active and persistent linguistic identity among the masses of both the cities has created further challenges for early childhood ESL learning.

It is worth noting that in Dhaka the introduction of 'Bangla Procholon Ain (Bengali Promotion Act)' of 1987, and the removal of ESL from public primary schools' curriculum twice in Kolkata have affected language learning atmosphere adversely in both the cities (Azizuddin, 2014; Begum, 2015; Chattopadhyay, 2016; Mahanti & Divyagunananda, 2018).

Theme 3: Formation of cultural identities and early childhood ESL learning within and outside public primary schools' periphery.

It was found that phobia of foreign culture exists in the realm of public primary schooling of Dhaka. Being more diverse whether in terms of culture, language or religion every classroom of Kolkata came with its own unique set of advantages and disadvantages. Whereas, advantages and disadvantages relating to cultural identities within early childhood ESL learning in public classrooms remained generally uniform throughout the city. The idea of building a future

'Western man' out of today's early childhood ESL learners still persist in different parts of both Kolkata and Dhaka due to the absence of indigenous mass-scale organized models of imparting ESL training and the colonial legacy that the English language carries. In an earlier research, Hamid and Erling (2016) made an observation that in Dhaka there is a long-held belief that a child can either be proficient in learning English or learning Bengali. It is still believed most pupils cannot be proficient in both the languages at the same time. This belief was reflected in the data received from the respondents of Dhaka. High number of respondents from Dhaka, much higher than Kolkata, thought learning English and Bengali together actually creates problems for the early childhood learners.

Theme 4: State of teaching affecting early childhood ESL learning in public primary schools.

In Dhaka the curriculum of ESL and the materials prepared as per its direction in the sphere of public primary schooling remained rigid. Instructions planned, based on those materials, automatically remains dated and poor. From the gathering of data, ideas like 'linguistic purism' and 'linguistic nationalism' were found to influence intra-classroom language learning activities. A shift in the mindset of teachers had also been reported. This shift of mindset among the majority of teachers has allegedly availed the most qualified and highly trained individuals to the private early childhood education (ECE) sector. As per the available literature, Hasan, Ali, Sultana and Parvin (2021) and Shahin (2023) pointed out that calling out the younger generation of teachers as 'money-minded' will not solve the structural issues of early childhood ESL learning. They proposed to identify factors within the sphere of public primary education that is 'pushing out' necessary talents towards the private sector. Multiple reports published by UNB (2022, 2023) have pointed out that many of the teachers who still stay in the public ECE sector hold fake degrees. Moreover, Rahman et al. (2019) observed that abrupt change from the usage of 'Grammar-Translation Method (GTM)' to 'Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)' neither enriched nor made the ESL learning in public primary classrooms more effective.

Many respondents in Kolkata too thought that teachers, especially in the field of early childhood ESL learning, lacked training and diligence in performing their duties. Many blamed the flawed assessment system based on multiple-choice questionnaires used in the ESL classrooms and 'no-fail/detention' policy of the government as signs of 'structural withering'. Many respondents proposed additional training on linguistic philosophies and student psychology for both who are

qualified and those language teachers who are in the process of earning their qualifications. Even from the published literature, especially by Rana (2010), Guha (2022) and Ghosh (2022), it can be seen teachers need to act with much more caution and empathy while dealing with pupils from various backgrounds and with various cognitive abilities.

Theme 5: Socio-economic factors and ideologies influencing early childhood ESL learning.

In both the cities, introduction of new liberal economic policies, which encourages the 'LPG' phenomenon, is deemed with scepticism. The term 'LPG' has mostly been used by respondents from Kolkata. It stands for liberalization, privatization and globalization. Private players entering into the ECE and associated sectors, are believed by many respondents, will only deepen the existing economic inequality in primary education. In the existing literature, it has already been stated by Hasan (2022) and Mithu (2023) that especially in Dhaka, rising cost of learning materials, stationery and other school items and ailing transport infrastructure have already started taking toll on early childhood learners from economically disadvantaged section of the society.

Moreover, in Kolkata some respondents pointed out that certain sections of the population who aligned themselves with left-wing political ideas saw English as a promoter of neo-liberal capitalist philosophy. They feared teaching English to early childhood learners from a tender age might harbour hedonistic consumerist tendencies in them. It was observed that while public primary classrooms in Dhaka had pupils from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, Kolkata's classrooms were predominantly filled with pupils from lower-middle and lower socio-economic strata.

Theme 6: Incorporation of new technologies in early childhood classroom ESL learning.

Many teachers in both the cities asserted that they were aware of new tools (at virtual level) and devices (at hardware level) that can be used for ESL learning in classrooms. More so in the case of Dhaka compared to Kolkata. Teachers from Dhaka, in bigger numbers compared to their Kolkata counterparts, saw the consumption of the ever-expanding virtual realm of technology more harmful for early childhood learners. Though cases of hyper-tension among early childhood learners are observed to be rising in Kolkata (Das Chattopadhyay, 2022). Interestingly, more teachers in Kolkata compared to Dhaka, were not exactly sure about the effects of new technologies on early childhood learners.

Theme 7: Learners' needs and current conditions in public primary early childhood ESL learning atmospheres in both the cities.

From the responses received from both the cities it is clear that there are multiple issues persisting in ESL learning environments of Kolkata and Dhaka, which are holding them far back from achieving the 'world-class' status. It has become increasingly challenging for teachers to motivate pupils to learn ESL. Through some of the respondents' own admissions it can be seen that teachers at their jobs cannot always cater to all the pupils' needs. Classrooms often being crowded become noisy and messy. Teachers find it difficult to control peer bullying during school hours. In both cities, distrust between school teachers and guardians appeared to be a major issue in building a cooperative and inclusive ESL learning environment.

Interestingly, it was found that pupils refrained from communicating with their teachers in Dhaka due to the fear of humiliation from their teachers, whereas in Kolkata, pupils refrained from communication in order to be self-reliant learners. Limited or almost no use of English outside classrooms is also holding pupils back from attaining competency in ESL. In the schools, both pupils and teachers are over-burdened with multiple activities and subjects to study. More pupils in Dhaka compared to Kolkata confessed to experience significant challenges in learning ESL from third grade.

A mismatch between what teachers thought pupils find most difficult to learn and what pupils actually find difficult to learn was recorded in Kolkata. Teachers thought it to be pronunciation and elocution, whereas pupils unveiled it to be grammar. More than Dhaka, respondents from Kolkata were spontaneous enough to admit that neither all skills nor all aspects of ESL learning is given equal importance in the classrooms. Though developing reading skills in ESL is provided with utmost importance in both the cities' learning environments, Kolkata has a higher tendency of training pupils to merely memorize and reproduce contents prescribed in the syllabus.

Theme 8: Motivations of early childhood ESL learners behind learning English, and the strategies they use to learn it.

From the responses received from Dhaka, it was clearly indicated as most well-trained and qualified teachers were absorbed by the private ECE sector not many teachers left in the public ECE sector are equipped to train pupils to diversify their learning

strategies. Whereas in Kolkata, rigid curriculum, lack of qualified human resource similar to Dhaka and the introduction of MCQ tests and 'no-detention' policy made assessment of pupils' learning strategies almost irrelevant in classrooms. Thus, pupils in both the cities were found to be excessively dependent on memory-related strategies. Compensatory and meta-cognitive strategies were used by a considerable population of pupils of Dhaka after memory-based strategies respectively.

Unlike Dhaka, a growing number of pupils in Kolkata are adapting to the usage of cognitive strategies after memory-related strategies. Kolkata's public primary pupil population had seemingly greater diversity in the strategies they chose for ESL learning. The reason behind this phenomenon can be the incorporation of fun and interactive games by Kolkata's teachers in ESL learning environments more compared to their Dhaka counterparts. This is evident from the data collected and analysed that Dhaka's teachers still heavily rely on conduction of competitions for best results of ESL learning in the same environment. Most pupils in Dhaka stated fluent verbal interaction with a native English speaker as their main motivation behind learning ESL.

Compared to Dhaka, more pupils in Kolkata stated pursuing knowledge and better understanding of global affairs as a motivating factor for ESL learning. Many respondents in both the cities observed that guardian-teacher relationship influenced pupils' ESL learning. Some respondents observed that a rising number of guardians force pupils to learn English only to pursue science, mathematics and technology in higher education. With dipping competence in both L1 and L2, the rate of code-switching and code-mixing among early childhood learners during communication are also on the rise in both the cities.

4. Conclusion

It can be adequately concluded that the ESL learning environments of public primary schools of Dhaka and Kolkata are still very teacher-centric. It fundamentally goes against how Ozerem and Akkoyunlu (2015) envision modern learning environments should be. Many teachers in both the cities still lack the skills to adequately identify learning strategies used by the pupils in the classrooms, let alone learning styles. Moreover, there lingers a question, whether even after the identification of learning styles and strategies of pupils the learning environments will efficiently be able to accommodate them. It can also be stated that Dhaka and Kolkata's public primary schools cater

more towards the creation of Ellstrom et al.'s (2008) 'adaptive' or 'reproductive' learning environment. Whether an 'innovative' or 'developmental'-type environment will better suit Dhaka and Kolkata's early childhood ESL learners, needs further research before initiation.

Both the cities being socially, linguistically and culturally diverse Manninen and company's five-dimensional model of analysis, as described by Hyppia et al. (2019), might be more effective for analysing learning environments of both the cities. The origin and legacy of English has created confusion, fear or utter disgust among various sections of the common masses of the Indian subcontinent. One reason behind the persistence of confusion is the fact that though English is often seen as a second language in public language learning settings neither policymakers nor teachers are exactly sure on whether it is complementary towards the 1st language Bengali. 'Aesthetic' reconstructions of schools and classrooms, assessments based on MCQ questionnaire and no-detention policies could neither effectively erase doubts about English nor could raise the bar of qualitative enhancement of the learning atmosphere.

There is an evident mismatch among what is required to be done, how it is to be done, when and where is it to be done. Language is a subjective entity. Assessments conducted through MCQs might not provide the best picture of the learners' capabilities. 'No-detention' policy might be effective for eliminating the fear of exams from the minds of early childhood learners but it should not translate into 'no-assessment' policy altogether. Teachers and policymakers need to remember conduction of tests and exams are part of the assessment process, but never the only way of assessing a pupil. Conduction of various competitions and fun and interactive games are affirmative steps towards realising the multiple horizons of motivating and assessing an early childhood ESL learner. Aesthetic reconstruction of schools and classrooms can attract pupils to schools but might fail to continuously motivate the pupils if the human and material resources directly involved in the learning environment fails to be effective. Moreover, as per Western Governors University's publication psychological and emotional landscapes are equally important as physical landscapes in learning (Lee, 2024). One early childhood learner may excel in English or in Bengali or both. But pressurizing a learner to be fully competent in English for its global appeal, or in Bengali for the assertion of one's own native identity might hurt his/her language learning confidence or capabilities. More effective measures should be put in place to restrict pupils from

completing their primary education without being competent in either of the languages.

It is quite understandable that ESL learning environments of Dhaka and Kolkata experience multiple challenges. Still, as per Martirena's (2025) observation the teachers' and the policymakers' communities ought not to hurry towards the creation of a 'perfect' learning atmosphere. Whether project-based learning is the future of ESL learning in the eastern part of the Indian sub-continent should solely depend on research-oriented, data-backed decision-making. Code-mixing and code-switching in multilingual classrooms can be a common occurrence, but it cannot be a replacement for building distinctive competencies in diverse languages. Lastly, policymaking for early childhood ESL learning should avoid being a mere trope to fulfil one particular politico-cultural or socio-economic agenda.

References

- Akhter, S. (2023). Number of pry Schools, students dropped across Bangladesh. *New Age Bangladesh*.
<https://www.newagebd.net/article/194478/number-of-pry-schools-students-dropped-across-bangladesh>
- Alhojailan, M.I. (2012). Thematic analysis: A critical review of its process and evaluation. *West East Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. -1, No. -1: 39-47.
- Awla, H.A. (2014). Learning styles and their relation to teaching styles. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*. Vol. -2, No. -3: 241-245.
- Azizuddin, M. (2014). *Administrative reform and capacity building: The case of primary education in Bangladesh* (Academic Dissertation). School of Management, University of Tampere.
- Basu, B.L. (2016). Ambiguities and tensions in the role and use of English in Bangladesh. *BRAC University Journal*. Vol. -11, No. -1: 57-62.
- Begum, M.T. (2015). The 'Cultural Legacy' of English in Bangladesh. *Language in India*. Vol. -15, No. -3: 239-252.
- Bhattacharya, S. (2017). A study on the factors affecting ESL learners' English speaking skills. *International Journal of English Research*. Vol. -3, Issue -4: 31-37.
- Busetto, L., Wick, W. & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*. Vol. -2, No. -14.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>
- Cadierno, T., Hansen, M.B. & Munoz, C. (2024). The role of the L2 learning environment in shaping individual learner factors and language achievement: A comparison study of Danish and Spanish learners of L2 English. *Journal for the Psychology of Language Learning*. Vol. -6, Issue -1: e6115524. <https://doi.org/10.52598/jpll/6/1/4>
- Chandan, M.S.K. (2023). Dhaka's uninspiring govt. primary schools. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/weekend-read/news/dhakas-uninspiring-govt-primary-schools-3244616>
- Chattopadhyay, T. (2016). *The Policy and Praxis of English Education in Secondary Schools in West Bengal (1977-2007)* (Research Article). Department of English & Other Modern European Languages (DEOMEL), Visva Bharti University.
- Das Chattopaddhyay, P. (2022). Barchey Shishu'er Hypertension'er Samasya (Cases of hypertension are increasing among children). *Anandabazar Patrika – Swastipaath (Saturday Supplementary Paper)*. Anandabazar Patrika (Published in Bengali). 26th November 2022: 4.
- Dey, A. (2020). Teaching English as a second language in West Bengal. *Gap Bodhi Taru: A Global Journal of Humanities*. Vol. -3, Issue -4: 26-29.
- Díaz-Granados, F.I., Dominguez, E., Ricardo, C., Ballesteros, B., & Fontalvo, H. (2009). Effects of a centered virtual environment on learning styles in the academic performance of college students. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies (iJET)*. Vol. -4, Special Issue - "SIIE'2008": 59-63.
- Ellström, E., Ekholm, B., & Ellström, P.E. (2008). Two types of learning environment: Enabling and constraining: A study of care work. *Journal of Workplace Learning*. Vol. -20, Issue -2: 84-97.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13665620810852250>
- Farzana, A. (2021). *A comparative study between English and Bangla: The perspective of phonemics, morphology and syntax*. ENG616: Comparative Linguistic, Department of English, North South University.
- Ghosh, S. (2022). School'er Shikkha Kaaje Laagchey Ki? (Is there any benefit of the education provided by the school?). *Anandabazar*

- Patrika* (Published in Bengali). Year -101, No. -86, 13th June 2022: 4.
- Gonzalez, V. (2022). How to use English learners' primary language in the classroom. *EduTopia*.
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/english-learners-primary-language-school/>
- Guha, C. (2022). Shwashbirodhi Shikkhaparibesh (The choking atmosphere of education). *Anandabazar Patrika* (Published in Bengali). Year -101, No. -143, 9th August 2022: 4.
- Hamid, M.O., & Erling, E.J. (2016). English-in-education policy and planning in Bangladesh: A critical examination. In R. Kirkpatrick (Ed) *English language education policy in Asia*. Language Policy, Vol. -11, Springer: Cham: 25-48. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-22464-0_2
- Hasan, M., Ali, M.M., Sultana, M.T. and Parvin, R. (2021). Impact of primary school infrastructure on the dropout rate: A situational analysis on the context of Bangladesh. *British Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. -3, Issue -3: 64-73.
- Hasan, M. (2022). Shikkhapanyer Mulyabridhhi: Shikkharthider Marar Opor Kharar Ghaa (Rising inflation of educational commodities: A rising concern for the students). *Prothom Alo* (Published in Bengali).
<https://www.prothomalo.com/opinion/column/o38mfk4ohj>
- Hashim, H.U., & Yunus, M.M. (2018). English as a Second Language (ESL) Learning: Setting the right environment for second language acquisition. *Tadris: Jurnal Keguruan dan Ilmu Tarbiyah (Tadris: Journal of Education and Teacher Training)*. DOI: 10.24042/tadris.v3i2.2941
- Hoque, M.E. (2008). *English language teaching and learning at Alim Level in the Madrasahs in Bangladesh: Problems and Possible Solutions* (Thesis). Department of English, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- Hunter, D., McCallum, J. and Howes, D. (2019) Defining Exploratory-Descriptive Qualitative (EDQ) research and considering its application to healthcare. *Journal of Nursing and Health Care*. Volume -4, Issue -1.
- Hyppia, M., Sointu, E., Hirsto, L., & Valtonen, T. (2019). Key components of learning environments in creating a positive flipped classroom course experience. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*. Vol. -18, No. -13: 61-86. DOI: 10.26803/ijlter.18.13.4
- Islam, M.N., & Hashim, A. (2019) Historical evolution of English in Bangladesh. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*. Vol. -10, No. -2: 247-255. DOI: 10.17507/JLTR.1002.05
- Israel, G.D. (1992). *Determining sample size*. Fact Sheet PEOD6 (November), Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida: 1-5.
- Khan, S. (2015). Dhaka vs Kolkata. *The Daily Star*.
<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/dhaka-vs-kolkata-131995?amp=>
- Leaver, B. L., & Ehrman, M. & Shekhtman, B. (2005). Learning styles and learning strategies. In *Achieving Success in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press: 65-91.
- Lee, S. (2024). 3 Types of learning environments. *WGU*. <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/3-types-learning-environments2111.html>
- Likitrattanaporn, W. (2018). A study of language learning strategies for practical use through the process of cooperative learning. *International Journal of Educational Technology and Learning*. Vol. -3, No.1: 35-44.
- Lim, W.M. (2024). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*. Vol. -33, Issue -2: 199-229. DOI: 10.1177/14413582241264619.
- Luoto, J.M. (2023). Comparative education and comparative classroom observation systems. *Comparative Education*. Vol. -59, Issue -4: 564-583. DOI: 10.1080/03050068.2023.2173917.
- Mahanti, A.K. & Divyagunananda, S. (2018). A study on the genesis of English as a second language at lower primary level in West Bengal. *IJRAR- International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*. Vol. -3, Issue -3: 1437-1441.
- Martirena, C.C. (2025). Using PBL to support young English learners. *EduTopia*.
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-young-ells-can-learn-english-content-simultaneously>
- Mithu, A.I. (2023). Dhaka traffic is much better when schools are closed. Why not use school buses? *The Business Standard*.
<https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/dhaka-traffic-much-better-when-schools-are-closed-why-not-use-school-buses-732662>
- Namaziandost, E., & Zaifar, M. (2020). Critical look at learning strategies. *Journal of*

- Anthropological and Archaeological Sciences*. Vol. -2, Issue -4: 307-311.
- Oranga, J., & Matere, A. (2023). Qualitative Research: Essence, types and advantages. *Open Access Library Journal*. Vol. -10: 1-9. DOI: 10.4236/oalib.1111001
- Ozerem, A., & Akkoyunlu, B. (2015). Learning environments designed according to learning styles and its effects on mathematics achievement. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*. Issue -61: 61-80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2015.61.4>
- Pashler, H., & McDaniel, M., & Rohrer, D., & Bjork, R. (2008). Learning styles: Concepts and evidence. *Journal of Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. Vol. -9, No. -3: 105-119.
- Rahman, S. (2019). *English teaching in Bangladesh: The lived experiences of secondary teachers in the process of change and innovation* (Thesis). University of Brighton.
- Rahman, M.M., Islam, M.S., Karim, A., Chowdhury, T.A., Rahman, M.M., Seraj, P.M.I., & Singh, M.K.M. (2019). English language teaching in Bangladesh today: Issues, outcomes and implications. *Language Testing in Asia*. Vol -9, Issue -9: [no pagination]. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-019-0085-8>
- Rana, K. (2010). *Social exclusion in and through elementary education: The case of West Bengal*. Pratichi Occasional Paper No.1, Pratichi (India) Trust in association with UNICEF Kolkata. Pratichi (India) Trust, Mayur Vihar -1, Delhi – 110091.
- Roy, S., Huq, S., & Rob, A.B.A. (2020). Faith and education in Bangladesh: A review of the contemporary landscape and challenges. *International Journal of Educational Development*. Vol. -79.
- Salam, U., & Sukarti, & Arifin, Z. (2020). An analysis of learning styles and learning strategies used by a successful language learner. *Journal of English Teaching*. Vol -6, No. -2: 111-121.
- Sarkar, P. (2018). Bhashaprem Bhashabirodh: Essays on Sociology of Languages (Love for Languages & Opposition to languages) (Published in Bengali) (2nd Ed) Dey's Publishing.
- School of Education, American University. (2023). Supporting English language learners: Resources for educators and administrators. *American University*. <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/english-language-learners-resources/>
- Seoane, E. & Suarez-Gomez, C. (2023). A look at the nativization of Bangladeshi English through corpus data. *Miscelania: A Journal of English and American Studies*. Vol. -68: 15-37. DOI:10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20238760
- Seth, V.K. (2017). Tale of two cities of South Asia: Consequences of changes in the nature of manufacturing on Dhaka and Kolkata. *Global Business Review*. Vol. -18, No. -6: 1613-1633. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150917713092>
- Shahin, A.H. (2023). The challenges and solutions to the education system in Bangladesh. Aamader Bangladesh, *BangladeshUS*. <https://bangladeshus.com/the-challenges-and-solutions-to-the-education-system-in-bangladesh/>
- Stewart, L. (No Date). Exploratory Research | Definition, how to conduct & examples. *Atlas.ti*. <https://atlasti.com/research-hub/exploratory-research>
- Tenny, S., & Brannan, J.M., & Brannan, G.D. (2022). Qualitative study. *StatPreals [Internet]*. National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/>
- UNB, (2022). 342 primary schools in Dhaka to get aesthetic reconstruction. *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2022/05/11/342-primary-schools-in-dhaka-to-get-aesthetic-reconstruction>
- UNB, (2023). State Minister: 37,926 Headmaster, Assistant Teacher posts vacant in primary schools. *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2023/06/06/state-minister-37926-posts-headmasters-assistant-teachers-vacant-in-primary-schools>

How to cite this article:

Roy-Chowdhury, P. (2025). Early Childhood ESL Learning in Dhaka and Kolkata: Analyzing Public Primary Schools' Learning Environments and Learning Strategies of Pupils. *Journal of Education and Learning Research*, 3(1), 1-12.