

## English Language Anxiety and Proficiency Among Secondary Students: A Correlational Study in West Bengal

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### ABSTRACT

Proficiency in English is required for both academic and professional success but many students generally experience anxiety when learning English as a second language. With an emphasis on demographic factors including gender and location, the current study explored the interplay between English Language Proficiency (ELP) and English Language Anxiety (ELA) among students in secondary education of West Bengal. This study incorporates a quantitative descriptive survey method to determine the relationship between secondary students' English language proficiency and anxiety in West Bengal accumulating data from 400 student sample by administering the standardised English Language Anxiety Scale and the English Language Proficiency Test. The findings revealed that anxiety and proficiency were significantly negatively correlated with each other as lower proficiency being linked with higher anxiety levels. Rural students experienced comparatively more anxiety than urban, even though urban females had better proficiency levels among the other groups. Differences between genders were also obvious as rural females exhibiting greater amount of anxiety than rural males whereas urban females displayed lower anxiety compared to urban males. Surprisingly, rural females were somewhat more proficient than rural male, despite feeling more anxious. This might be attributed to contextual factors or increased motivation. The study draws attention to the adverse impacts of anxiety on language learning, especially among female and rural students. The implementation with particular treatments such as mindful practices and collaborative language exercises can reduce anxiety and improve language proficiency. Policymakers and educators should consider demographic variances while developing strategies for language education to provide an enjoyable learning atmosphere.

**Keywords:** *Anxiety, English language, Proficiency, Correlation*

Proficiency in English has become an essential skill for learners in today's globalized world, particularly in non-native nations where English is the official language. Since English is frequently used as the predominant language of education, proficiency in the language is essential for both professional and academic success. Because of more effective language education programs and the growing use of English in technology and the media, the students today usually showcase greater levels of English proficiency than those of prior

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generations (Baker & MacIntyre, 2020). Assessments of proficiency illustrates that many pupils have excellent levels of grammatical, lexical, and syntactic ability. But even with this noticeable improvement in students' English language skills, majority of them still struggle greatly when it comes to public speaking, which is frequently accompanied by avoidance behaviours, anxiety, and dread (Horwitz, 2010). Speaking in social settings can cause anxiety in even highly proficient English speakers, which makes them reluctant to participate in class discussions and afraid of receiving unfavourable feedback from their peers (Cheng et al., 2022). Horwitz et al. (1986) found that anxiety about speaking in public is one of the most commonly expressed concerns among students of second languages, including those who do well on conventional tests to assess English proficiency. This shows that having proficiency in a language might not be enough to predict success when giving public talks. Affective factors linked to learning a second language, such as self-esteem, fear of receiving a poor grade, and the need for social acceptance, might be the cause of this disparity (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016).

According to Horwitz et al. (1986), language anxiety is "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process." (p.128). It appears as a sense of discomfort, worry, and apprehension. This description is consistent with that of MacIntyre & Gardner (1994), who insisted on that anxiety related to foreign languages is the sensation of pressure and feeling uneasy that is particularly associated with speaking, listening, and learning in second language environments. There are several reasons for students' nervousness in the context of learning a foreign language. According to Boukranaa and Mjahad (2024), these factors include pressure from peers, anxiety over performance, cultural disparities, language barriers, academic pressure, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence in language skills, unfamiliar methods of instruction or materials, and the quality of the relationship between teachers and students.

### LITERATURE REVIEWS

English language anxiety, also known as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), has been a prominent field of research, particularly among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The detrimental effects that anxiety may have on secondary-level students' language learning have been highlighted by recent studies that have continued to examine the relationship between anxiety and proficiency. Language Anxiety is commonly recognized as one of the most thoroughly researched individual-difference factors in the field of second language acquisition (Tsui & Cheng, 2022). The fear and uneasiness that students experience when studying or using English in both official and informal settings is known as English language anxiety. Tanveer, 2023 claims that there are distinct types of anxiety in including speaking, writing, and listening anxiety. Students in secondary school are especially susceptible to these anxieties which might affect their general language ability since they are frequently under scholastic pressure to do well in English (Shaari, 2022). Several factors have been shown in more recent studies to be related to anxiety in secondary ESL learners, especially when it comes to learning English.

- a) **Fear of Negative Evaluation:** According to a recently published study by Xu (2021), students in secondary school who struggle with English are particularly vulnerable to this anxiety, which causes them to shy away from speaking assignments and impedes language development even more.
- b) **Proficiency Level and Self-Perception:** According to a research by Zarei & Pashmforoosh (2022), students who are less proficient in English typically have

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greater anxiety levels because they believe that their linguistic abilities are unsatisfactory. This self-perception of insecurity makes it much harder for them to operate the language successfully in everyday contexts.

- c) **Classroom Environment:** According to a study by Lee et al. (2023), anxiety levels may be considerably lowered by using engaging, non-threatening activities for learning languages and positive reinforcement. On the other hand, conventional, lecture-based teaching approaches that give students little opportunity for engagement can make them feel more anxious.
- d) **Cultural and Social Influences:** According to Ahmed and Haider's (2022), secondary school students from non-English speaking backgrounds may experience increased anxiety due to pressure to meet social standards for English competence.

Multiple studies have examined the effects of English language anxiety on language competency, proficiency specifically in the areas of speaking, listening, and writing.

- i) **Speaking Proficiency:** One of the types of language anxiety that is most frequently investigated is speaking proficiency. Research by Xu (2021) and Gao et al. (2023) showed that speaking ability is severely hampered by anxiety. Students who are nervous about speaking in English tend to avoid verbal interactions and have trouble with pronunciation, fluency, and clear-thinking expression, which eventually lowers their speaking skill.
- ii) **Listening comprehension:** Anxiety has been shown to have an impact on listening comprehension in recent studies. Students with high anxiety levels have trouble understanding spoken English, especially in academic contexts where they must comprehend complicated instructions or rapid speech, according to a research by Zhang and Wei (2022). This impairs their comprehension of important material, which impacts their general English skills.
- iii) **Writing and Reading Competencies:** Despite being less extensively studied, anxiety has been documented to impact these abilities as well. According to studies conducted by Lee et al. (2023), students who experience anxiety find it difficult to write smoothly in English because they frequently wonder about their language and grammar. Similarly, students with high levels of anxiety suffer with comprehension of texts because they are frequently distracted by the dread of making mistakes, which impairs their attention on the text (Shaari, 2022).

### *Rationale of the Study*

The overall goal of this study was to ascertain whether students' anxiety about learning a language and their level of proficiency, particularly in English as a second language, were connected to one another. This provides learners, teaching professionals, teacher educators, policymakers, and institutions with vital information regarding students' language learning anxiety. This study may help teachers recognize the language learning anxiety of their second language learners. It can thus assist them in creating efficient teaching strategies to mitigate language learning anxiety and to create a less stressful learning environment in the classroom. Furthermore, they are able to assist classroom students by offering appropriate suggestions or recommending any potential learning techniques to go beyond the hurdle. Furthermore, it is imperative for students to recognize their own deficiencies when learning a second language, since this may also assist them in identifying effective coping mechanisms for their anxiety issues. Additionally, the current study may give the educational institutions valuable information for developing an appropriate language learning strategy to address students' anxiety related to learning a foreign language. To help students feel less anxious, the

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institution may also offer suitable resources and activities for learning a second language. This is thoroughly supported by Yan and Horwitz (2008), who suggest that students' anxiety related to language learning may be decreased by recognizing the important components and applying pertinent solutions to solve the issue.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study incorporated a quantitative research design, and a descriptive approach was used to gather and analyse data. This study's objective is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the problem by efficiently collecting data using questionnaires. In order to acquire numerical data from a large sample, the survey technique was ensured to use as the primary data collection instrument. This method made it possible to describe the current state or characteristics of the phenomenon under study in an understandable and impartial manner. By using descriptive research, the study aims to identify trends, patterns, and insights within the population being studied by summarizing and analysing the data collected.

#### *Variables of the Study:*

The study concentrates on the two main variables:

- i) English Language Anxiety (ELA)
- ii) English Language Proficiency (ELP).

The study's demographic factors are as follows:

- i) Gender
- ii) Locality.

#### *Objectives of the study:*

Based on prior studies and the literature, the following objectives were formulated:

1. To measure English Language Anxiety of secondary students in West Bengal.
2. To measure Proficiency in English of secondary students in West Bengal.
3. To determine if there is a mean difference between secondary students' English language proficiency and anxiety in relation to demographic factors.
4. To determine if there is a significant relationship between English Language Anxiety and English Language Proficiency among secondary students in West Bengal based on demographic variables.

#### *Hypotheses of the Study:*

The following null hypotheses have been proposed for the present study based on the objectives:

- **H<sub>0.1.</sub>**: There is no mean difference in English Language Anxiety of Secondary students based on demographic variables.
- **H<sub>0.2.</sub>**: There is no mean difference in English language proficiency of Secondary students based on demographic variables.
- **H<sub>0.3.</sub>**: No significant relationship exists between English language anxiety and English language proficiency of secondary students in West Bengal.
- **H<sub>0.4.</sub>**: No significant relationship exists between English language anxiety and proficiency among secondary students in West Bengal in relation to demographic variables.

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### *Sample of the Study:*

The researcher selected representative samples for the study using a multi-stage sampling technique. The 23 districts in the state of West Bengal were separated into four zones based on their geographic locations, and two zones were randomly selected. The lottery system was used to select two districts from each of the selected zones, which included Howrah and South 24 Parganas (Kolkata Zone), Bankura and Purba Bardhaman (Burdwan Zone). From each district, two schools were chosen at random: one from the rural region and one from the urban region. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 400 students preparing for the Madhyamik Examination (secondary) and learning English as a second language. There were 200 males, 200 females, 200 from rural areas, and 200 from urban areas.

**Table 1: Sample Preparation: Gender Distribution of Rural and Urban**

<i>Sample of The Study</i>			
<b>Locale</b>	<b>Gender(M/F)</b>		
	<i>Female(F)</i>	<i>Male(M)</i>	Total
<i>Rural</i>	116	84	<b>200 Rural</b>
<i>Urban</i>	84	116	<b>200 Urban</b>
<b>Total sample</b>	<b>200 Females</b>	<b>200 Males</b>	<b>400</b>

### *Tools used in the study:*

Evaluating English language proficiency and anxiety were the primary means of gathering data for the present study. The following tools were likewise employed in accordance with the needs of the study.

- 1. English Language Anxiety Scale:** The English Language Anxiety Scale was used in the study for measuring anxiety. The responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. A pilot study with 100 students taken from two secondary schools in Howrah district, West Bengal, standardized the English Language Anxiety Test. The test, which uses a 5-point Likert scale, comprised 30 items (27 positive and 3 negative) covering five different dimensions: speaking, listening, reading, writing, and test anxiety. When reliability was assessed, it demonstrated good internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.904. The validity of the test was confirmed by the observation of significant item-total correlations for each and every item. Expert views were taken into consideration to evaluate item relevance and comprehensibility in order to ensure content validity. The final test was administered to 400 participants and scored using a combination of favourable and adverse remarks that represented varying anxiety levels. Despite the scale's multidimensionality, the current study only takes the total score into account. Other dimensions are not considered.
- 2. English Language Proficiency Scale:** The English Language Proficiency Test was refined to 35 items after being piloted with 100 students to standardize it. Writing abilities, vocabulary and semantics, grammar and use, as well as comprehension are the four main domains in which the test assesses proficiency. Students are given one mark for correctly answering each of the 34 multiple-choice questions and zero for incorrectly answering them. Additionally, there is one writing task that has to be finished in order to receive a score out of five. The test's reliability was determined through the Cronbach's alpha of 0.877, and it further explained strong internal consistency. Experts evaluated the test's validity to ensure that it appropriately measures proficiency.

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**Data collection and Scoring:** To collect data, 400 individuals from various educational institutions in West Bengal were administered the English Language Proficiency Test and the English Language Anxiety Test, respectively. To ensure compliance with ethical standards, prior permission was received from the appropriate authorities. The participants received explicit instructions outlining the purpose of the exam as well as how their responses would be scored. The English language anxiety test booklet employed a 5-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Anxiety levels were evaluated by rating positive statements on a scale of 5 to 1 and reverse rating items that are negative. The final score of the individuals represented their overall degree of anxiety, with lower scores indicating less anxiety and larger scores indicating higher levels. The English language proficiency test's multiple-choice questions and writing section were designed to assess a variety of English proficiency skills, such as vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and writing ability. Predetermined correct answers were used for scoring, and each part was given a certain weight. The total number of responses obtained from each segment was used to calculate the overall proficiency score, which provided a comprehensive evaluation of the participants' levels of English proficiency.

### ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

#### *Analysis of Mean Differences in English Language Anxiety and Proficiency*

The null hypotheses H01 and H02 proclaimed that there is no mean difference in English Language Anxiety (ELA) or English Language Proficiency (ELP) among secondary students based on demographic characteristics such as location (rural/urban) and gender (male/female). The table below shows the mean, standard deviation, lowest, and maximum values for each group.

**Table 2: Gender and Locality Comparison of ELA and ELP Mean Scores and Variability**

<b>Mean Differences</b>				
<b>Locality</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Statistics</b>	<b>ELA</b>	<b>ELP</b>
<b>RURAL</b>	<b>MALE</b>	Mean	<b>83.30</b>	<b>21.64</b>
		N	84	84
		Std. Deviation	22.944	7.990
		Minimum	36	7
		Maximum	127	36
	<b>FEMALE</b>	Mean	<b>83.41</b>	<b>22.00</b>
		N	116	116
		Std. Deviation	23.502	8.119
		Minimum	39	5
		Maximum	135	37
<b>URBAN</b>	<b>MALE</b>	Mean	<b>79.50</b>	<b>21.15</b>
		N	116	116
		Std. Deviation	18.237	6.504
		Minimum	32	6
		Maximum	113	35
	<b>FEMALE</b>	Mean	<b>76.12</b>	<b>24.07</b>
		N	84	84
		Std. Deviation	22.086	6.884
		Minimum	37	11
		Maximum	121	37

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A comparison of English Language Anxiety (ELAT) and English Language Proficiency (ELPT) among secondary students based on location and gender uncovered notable discrepancies. Rural students had more English language anxiety (Male - 83.30, Female - 83.41) than urban students (Male - 79.50, Female - 76.12), reflecting that urban students are less anxious. In terms of gender, females in rural locations disclosed somewhat greater levels of anxiety than males do, whereas females in urban locations had lower levels of anxiety than males. With mean ELPT scores of 21.64 for male students and 22.00 for female students, rural students tend to perform somewhat better in terms of their proficiency than urban students, whereas female students (24.07) exceed male students (21.15). This would suggest that urban females might have stronger English language proficiency. These variations indicated that location and gender may impact both anxiety and proficiency levels. The observed disparities in mean scores by location and gender have pointed to possible variances in English Language Anxiety and Proficiency.

### *Relationship between English Language Anxiety and Proficiency: Hypothesis Testing (H<sub>0.3</sub>)*

The hypothesis (H<sub>0.3</sub>) states that no significant relationship exists between English language anxiety and English language proficiency of secondary students in West Bengal.

**Table 3: Significance and Strength of Overall Correlation Between ELA and ELP Scores**

<b>Correlations</b>			
<i>Inferential Statistics</i>		<b>ELA</b>	<b>ELP</b>
<b>English Language Anxiety (ELA)</b>	Pearson correlation coefficient (r)	1	<b>-.623**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	400	400
<b>English Language Proficiency (ELP)</b>	Pearson correlation coefficient (r)	<b>-.623**</b>	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	400	400

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation value between ELA and ELP was found -0.623 that indicates a moderate to strongly negative association. This suggests that higher anxiety is connected with decreased proficiency. The significance value (Sig. 2-tailed) is 0.000, which is less than the threshold of 0.01, suggesting that the correlation is statistically significant. As a result, the null hypothesis (H<sub>0.3</sub>) is rejected, indicating that there is a significant negative connection between English Language Anxiety and Proficiency amongst secondary-level students in West Bengal.

### *Interpretation of Correlational Analysis between English Language Anxiety and Proficiency: Locality and Gender-wise*

The null hypothesis (H<sub>0.4</sub>) investigated in this study claims that "No significant relationship exists between English language anxiety and proficiency among secondary students in West Bengal in relation to demographic variables."

To test this hypothesis, a correlational study of English Language Anxiety (ELA) and English Language Proficiency (ELP) was undertaken separately in rural and urban areas, as well as by gender. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was calculated to estimate the strength and direction of the relationship between ELA and ELP.

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**Table 4: Correlation Table (Locality and Gender-Wise)**

<i>Correlational Statistics</i>					
Locality	Gender	Variable	Correlations	ELA	ELP
Rural	Male	ELA	Pearson Correlation	1	<b>-.619**</b>
			Sig. (2-Tailed)		.000
			N	84	84
		ELP	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.619**</b>	1
			Sig. (2-Tailed)	.000	
			N	84	84
	Female	ELA	Pearson Correlation	1	<b>-.677**</b>
			Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
			N	116	116
		ELP	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.677**</b>	1
			Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
			N	116	116
Urban	Male	ELA	Pearson Correlation	1	<b>-.512**</b>
			Sig. (2-Tailed)		.000
			N	116	116
		ELP	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.512**</b>	1
			Sig. (2-Tailed)	.000	
			N	116	116
	Female	ELA	Pearson Correlation	1	<b>-.660**</b>
			Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
			N	84	84
		ELP	Pearson Correlation	<b>-.660**</b>	1
			Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
			N	84	84

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Rural Locality:** In rural locations, males have a moderate to significant negative connection between ELA and ELP ( $r = -0.619$ ), indicating that higher levels of anxiety reduce proficiency. The relationship between them is statistically significant ( $p = 0.000$ ). Rural females showed a higher negative correlation ( $r = -0.677$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), implying that their anxiety had a little bigger detrimental influence on their performance than males.

**Urban Locality:** Urban males had a moderate negative relationship between ELA and ELP ( $r = -0.512$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), but urban females exhibited a moderate to strong negative correlation ( $r = -0.660$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). This suggests that anxiousness has had an adverse effect on proficiency in both genders, concerning females being slightly more affected.

Regardless of location or gender, the data shows that English language anxiety significantly correlates negatively with English language proficiency. However, females in both rural and urban areas demonstrated a significantly higher negative relationship than their male counterparts. Furthermore, rural students (both male and female) had a higher negative association than urban. This could possibly indicate that rural students, particularly females, experienced higher levels of anxiety, which had a greater influence on their performance than their urban fellow students.

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### *Major Findings*

- Rural students had greater levels of English language anxiety compared to urban. Of all the demographic categories, urban females were the most proficient, whereas urban males were the least proficient.
- Rural females had somewhat more anxiety than rural males, but urban females had lower anxiety levels than urban males. In addition, urban females were more proficient than urban males.
- The relationship between English Language proficiency (ELP) and English Language Anxiety (ELA) is significantly inverse, suggesting that lower proficiency is linked to higher anxiety levels.
- Males in rural areas had a moderate to strong negative correlation between anxiety and proficiency, whereas females had a strong negative correlation. In urban areas, males had a moderate negative correlation, whereas females experienced a moderate to strong negative relationship. Females in both rural and urban environments showed a somewhat higher negative correlation than their male counterparts.
- Regardless of location, anxiety had a greater detrimental effect on proficiency in females than in males. Compared to urban learners, rural students especially female students had higher anxiety levels, and that had had a significant effect on their performance. It may be possible to enhance English language proficiency through interventions aimed at reducing anxiety, especially for female and rural students. According to a study conducted by Bakar and Ahmad (2023), teachers who have received training in recognizing and resolving language anxiety can foster a more encouraging learning environment in the classroom, which lowers anxiety and increases students' interest in learning English.

### **DISCUSSION**

With an emphasis on demographic factors including gender and location (rural vs urban), the results of this study provide insight into the relationship between English Language Proficiency (ELP) and English Language Anxiety (ELA) among secondary students. According to the study's findings, anxiety and proficiency significantly correlated negatively, meaning that poorer English proficiency is linked to higher anxiety levels. This tendency is consistent across rural and urban areas, as well as among male and female students. The detrimental effects of anxiety on academic performance were highlighted by a study conducted by Alavi & Shafiee (2023) which discovered that students in secondary schools with high anxiety levels performed noticeably worse on standardized English test than their less anxious peers.

One of the most notable findings from the data is that, on general, students in rural areas had higher levels of anxiety related to the English language than students in urban areas. This might be attributable to less exposure to English-speaking environments and fewer possibilities for practical language usage in remote places. Despite the increased stress, rural students, particularly females, accomplished marginally better than urban. This implies that despite their higher levels of anxiousness, rural students could somehow work hard to become proficient, probably as a result of greater motivation or the effect of academic hardship.

Gender differences were also identified as a major component in the association between anxiety and proficiency. Rural females had somewhat greater anxiety levels than rural males,

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but urban females had lower anxiety than urban males. Interestingly, across all categories, urban females had the strongest proficiency levels, whilst urban men displayed the lowest. This disparity draws attention to the possible impact of social and cultural elements on learning a second language, since urban females could find that more encouraging or supporting surroundings help them get over their nervousness and achieve high levels of proficiency. Zhao and He (2021) discovered that peer assistance, such as collaborative pair or group work, helped students to practice English in a less stressful, more participatory atmosphere, resulting in improved language ability.

In addition, the correlation study shows that anxiety and proficiency were negatively correlated slightly more for female than for male, both in rural and urban areas. This result suggests that anxiousness affects female students' linguistic skills more than male students do. Furthermore, rural learners, regardless of gender, demonstrated a higher negative correlation than those living in urban areas, suggesting that rural students may face more severe impacts of anxiety on their language learning satisfactory outcomes.

### *Limitations of the Study*

- The study was limited to government-sponsored or government-aided schools that use Bengali as their primary language of teaching learning.
- Only two demographic factors were considered in this study. Other demographic factors, such as religion and caste, may be considered.
- The data analysis did not incorporate different dimensions of English language proficiency or anxiety.
- The study's sample consisted solely of class X pupils who were appearing for their secondary level (Madhyamik) examination.
- The study did not address socioeconomic status.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the necessity to address English language anxiety in secondary students especially in rural locations and among female learners. It may be possible to reduce anxiety and promote language development by putting supportive practices and focused treatments into place, such as language workshops and anxiety management programs. Gregersen & MacIntyre (2022) discovered that mindful therapies, such as exercises involving breathing and meditation, dramatically lowered students' anxiety levels, allowing them to participate more confidently in English language activities. Rahimi & Bigdeli (2022) found that task-based language teaching decreased anxiety and enhanced speaking proficiency among secondary school learners. In order to establish more inclusive and anxiety-reducing learning environments, educators and policymakers should take these demographic differences into account when developing language curriculum and support systems.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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