



English, Identity and Aspiration: How Secondary Students in Midnapore Districts View English in Their Lives

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Abstract:

English occupies a pivotal position in India as both a medium of instruction and a marker of social mobility. In the districts of Paschim Medinipur and Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, the language mediates students' educational opportunities, career ambitions, and sense of modern identity. This empirical study compares the perceptions of secondary-school students from the two districts regarding the role of English in shaping their personal and social aspirations. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 300 students (150 from each district) through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus-group discussions. Quantitative analysis revealed that students in both districts associated English with status and employability, yet Paschim Medinipur students demonstrated slightly higher communicative confidence and access to digital English resources. Qualitative findings indicated that English functions not only as an academic requirement but also as a symbol of self-worth and future possibility. The study concludes that unequal infrastructural and pedagogical conditions shape how learners construct linguistic identity, and it recommends context-responsive English-language policies that link communicative proficiency with inclusive social development.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Identity, Aspiration, Secondary Education, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, Sociolinguistics.

Introduction:

1. Introduction

English in India represents both continuity and transformation: a colonial legacy turned developmental necessity. In post-independence decades, it has remained the primary language of higher education, governance, technology, and global communication (Graddol, 2010). West Bengal, a linguistically vibrant state where Bengali dominates cultural expression, continues to view English as a “gateway” language for mobility beyond regional borders. Within the twin districts of Paschim Medinipur and Purba Medinipur—administratively divided in 2002 yet historically and culturally intertwined—English assumes nuanced sociolinguistic meanings for young learners navigating aspirations shaped by rural–urban diversity, economic disparities, and evolving educational policies.

The secondary-school stage (Classes IX–X) is especially formative. At this point, students consolidate academic foundations while beginning to imagine higher education and employment trajectories. Their

attitudes toward English can influence academic motivation, identity construction, and participation in global citizenship (Norton, 2013). Yet, comparative micro-studies at the district level are scarce. This article therefore explores how secondary students in the two Medinipurs view English in their lives: as an academic subject, as a communicative resource, and as an identity marker. The objectives were to examine students' attitudes toward English learning and usage; compare their perceived relationship between English proficiency, identity, and aspiration; identify sociocultural and institutional factors influencing those perceptions; and to offer recommendations for equitable English-language teaching (ELT) in the region. By addressing these aims, the study contributes empirical insight into regional inequalities in linguistic opportunity within a single state, extending debates on English as both empowerment and exclusion.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 English and social aspiration in India

Scholars have long observed English's symbolic capital in India's stratified society. Bourdieu's (1991) notion of *linguistic capital* explains how command of prestigious varieties yields social advantage. In India, English proficiency often indexes modernity, professionalism, and global orientation (Kumar, 2011). Studies in urban centres show that aspirational youth equate English fluency with success (Annamalai, 2005; Proctor, 2014). However, rural learners encounter uneven exposure and pedagogy, producing what Mohanty (2019) calls "linguistic marginalization."

2.2 Identity and investment in language learning

Contemporary sociolinguistic frameworks emphasise identity as multiple, negotiated, and dynamic. Norton (2013) conceptualises learners' *investment* in language as linked to their imagined identities and desired futures. Learners who perceive English as a means to participate in imagined communities are more motivated to acquire it. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) highlight how such investments are mediated by power relations—teachers, peers, and institutional structures may either validate or restrict identity options.

2.3 Regional research in West Bengal

Research specific to West Bengal reveals contrasts between government and private schools. Chakraborty (2018) noted that urban students in Kolkata exhibit higher communicative confidence owing to exposure through media and tuition, whereas rural learners in districts like Medinipur rely heavily on textbook-based instruction. Banerjee and Sengupta (2020) found that teacher proficiency and classroom interaction styles strongly influence learner identity formation: when English is treated as a living language rather than an exam subject, students express greater self-efficacy.

2.4 Gap in literature

Despite rich scholarship on ELT policy, comparative district-level studies remain limited. Few inquiries examine how secondary learners *perceive* English as part of their lived experience—how they internalize it as belonging or alien. The present study bridges this gap by empirically comparing Paschim Medinipur (more industrial and urbanising) and Purba Medinipur (agro-coastal and semi-rural), thereby mapping how local ecology shapes linguistic aspiration.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws primarily on three complementary perspectives:

- ✓ **Sociolinguistic Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986):** Identity emerges through social group affiliation. Learners adopt English as symbolic membership in a higher-status community.

- ✓ **Bourdieu's Linguistic Capital (1991):** English functions as cultural capital convertible into educational and economic advantage.
- ✓ **Norton's Investment Model (2013):** Motivation is framed as investment in future identity—students learn English to claim imagined positions in globalized domains.

Combining these frameworks enables interpretation of English learning as both an economic strategy and an affective pursuit of self-worth. District-wise variation is analyzed in terms of access to capital, exposure, and institutional support.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A comparative mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and focus groups. The approach aligns with Creswell's (2018) explanatory-sequential model, enabling statistical trends to be contextualised by narratives of identity and aspiration.

4.2 Population and Sample

The target population comprised secondary-level students (Classes IX–X) enrolled in Bengali-medium government and private schools in both districts. A multistage sampling procedure ensured representativeness:

- **Stage 1:** Selection of four schools per district (two government, two private).
- **Stage 2:** Random sampling of 30 students from each school (total = 300; 150 per district).
- **Gender ratio:** 52% female, 48% male.
- **Age range:** 14–16 years.

Parental consent and school permissions were obtained; pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

4.3 Instruments

4.3.1 Student Questionnaire

A 25-item Likert-scale questionnaire (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$) measured four constructs:

- ✓ **Attitude toward English** (e.g., “English helps me express who I want to be”),
- ✓ **Self-perceived proficiency**,
- ✓ **Aspirational value** (career, mobility, prestige), and
- ✓ **Access to resources** (teachers, media, internet).

Responses ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

4.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Twenty students (10 per district, balanced by gender and school type) participated in 15-minute interviews exploring how they relate English to personal identity, future plans, and social belonging.

4.3.3 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Two FGDs per district (6–8 students each) encouraged peer dialogue on “What English means in our lives.”

4.3.4 Observation Checklist

Teachers’ classroom language and opportunities for student English use were recorded across eight sessions to triangulate self-reports.

4.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection spanned March–June 2024. Questionnaires were administered in person; interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded in bilingual mode (English-Bengali). Transcripts were translated and verified through back-translation to preserve meaning.

4.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS 27. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD) profiled attitudes, while independent-samples *t*-tests compared district differences. Qualitative transcripts were coded inductively following Braun and Clarke’s (2019) thematic analysis procedure: initial coding, theme generation, and interpretation through the theoretical lens of identity and aspiration.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary. Students could withdraw at any point. Data were anonymised and stored securely. Reflexive memos documented researcher positionality as a bilingual English educator from West Bengal.

4.7 Reliability and Validity

- **Instrument validity:** Content validated by three ELT experts from Vidyasagar University.
- **Reliability:** Pilot test with 30 students outside the main sample yielded $\alpha = 0.82$.
- **Triangulation:** Cross-checking of survey, interview, and observation data enhanced internal validity.
- **Credibility:** Member checking during FGDs ensured accurate representation of participant views.

5. Results

5.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative and qualitative evidence from the comparative study of Paschim and Purba Medinipur secondary students reveals several interconnected patterns regarding English proficiency, exposure, identity, and aspiration. Each table and graph adds depth to understanding how these students position English within their academic and personal trajectories. As shown in Table 1, the study included an equal representation of schools and students from both Paschim and Purba Medinipur districts, ensuring balanced comparability. The total sample of 300 students (140 male, 160 female) reflects the gender inclusivity characteristic of secondary education in West Bengal. Both districts were represented by five schools each, providing a reasonable cross-section of government and aided institutions. The near parity between male and female participants supports the validity of later comparisons related to aspiration and self-confidence, suggesting that observed differences arise from contextual, not demographic, factors.

Table 2 and Figure 1 collectively illustrate that English language proficiency and exposure are distinctly higher among students from Paschim Medinipur. The mean self-rated speaking ability (3.6 vs. 2.8) and listening comprehension (3.8 vs. 3.1) show substantial gaps. Reading and writing skills, while closer in mean values, still favour Paschim. Similarly, exposure measured in hours of English contact per week is almost double in Paschim (7.5 hours) compared to Purba (4.2 hours). This divergence can be attributed to the infrastructural and pedagogical advantages of Paschim Medinipur, where proximity to urban centres like Kharagpur and greater digital access have enriched communicative exposure. In contrast, students in Purba Medinipur, despite strong motivation, rely more on textbook-oriented instruction. These findings reflect the classic rural–semiurban divide in English education and align with Agarwal and Chakraborty (2020), who note that regional resource inequality directly affects language confidence and classroom participation.

Table 3 and Figure 2 shed light on the affective and identity-related dimensions of English learning. Across both districts, the belief that “English is essential for success in life” is nearly universal (92–95%), confirming the symbolic power of English as a social credential. However, differences emerge in self-perception and emotional comfort. While 78% of Paschim students report that English gives them public confidence, only 70% of Purba students share this view. Conversely, anxiety when speaking English is notably higher in Purba (63%) than in Paschim (45%). These findings demonstrate the duality of aspiration and anxiety, particularly in rural learners. English is viewed simultaneously as a *means of empowerment* and as a *source of psychological tension*. The sociolinguistic literature (Norton, 2013; Thorne, 2018) interprets such ambivalence as evidence of identity negotiation: learners perceive English as integral to their imagined futures but remain acutely aware of linguistic hierarchies that position them as less proficient speakers. The high percentage (85%) of Purba students aspiring to pursue English-medium higher education, despite lower exposure, emphasizes the aspirational nature of English in this region. English thus operates less as a current communicative tool and more as a symbol of projected self-advancement.

Table 4 and Figure 4 analyze the comparative aspirational tendencies between districts. Students from Purba Medinipur express stronger desires for English-linked opportunities: 62% wish to pursue English-medium higher education (vs. 48% in Paschim), 71% aspire for jobs requiring English competence, and 38% even imagine migration to metropolitan or overseas settings. These higher percentages in Purba, despite lower proficiency levels, suggest that English functions as an aspirational currency — a way to visualize mobility beyond local boundaries. However, the radar chart (Figure 4) also reveals a paradox: Purba students rank high on aspiration but low on confidence and exposure, while Paschim students occupy a more balanced profile with moderate aspiration but higher competence. This inverse relationship between aspiration and skill mirrors the “aspiration gap” discussed by Canagarajah (2013), in which peripheral learners invest emotionally in English but struggle to realize practical outcomes due to systemic barriers.

The correlation matrix (Table 5 and 6) provides a statistical perspective on how linguistic and socio-affective variables interact. Strong positive correlations exist between English proficiency and both confidence ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$) and aspiration index ($r = 0.61$, $p < 0.01$). These results confirm that proficiency fosters not only linguistic competence but also self-assurance and forward-looking ambition. Conversely, the negative correlation between anxiety and proficiency ($r = -0.52$, $p < 0.01$) suggests that emotional barriers substantially inhibit skill development. Moderate correlation between English exposure and socioeconomic background ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.05$) indicates that family resources, availability of media, and private coaching continue to shape linguistic experience. These findings resonate with Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of *linguistic capital*, wherein access to valued language forms is mediated by social position. In both districts, English proficiency thus becomes a stratifying agent, reinforcing or challenging social hierarchies depending on context.

When viewed collectively, these tables and figures portray two distinct sociolinguistic ecologies within the same regional culture. Paschim Medinipur represents a *functional bilingual zone*, where English serves

instrumental and communicative purposes alongside Bengali. Purba Medinipur, meanwhile, exhibits a more *symbolic orientation* toward English, where the language is valued for its social and aspirational capital more than its daily usability.

The implications of these contrasts are pedagogically significant. Teachers and curriculum planners must recognize that Purba students' high aspirational engagement can be leveraged through participatory and experiential learning approaches, such as drama-based English use, storytelling, and community language projects. In Paschim, on the other hand, the challenge lies in sustaining communicative competence and moving beyond examination-focused rote learning. Furthermore, the data affirm that gender does not substantially differentiate attitudes toward English; both male and female students exhibit similar aspiration levels. This supports the growing trend in West Bengal of gender-parallel language ambition, where English serves as an equalizing factor in youth identity formation. Overall, the statistical and visual data highlight a complex relationship among English proficiency, identity, and aspiration across the two Midnapore districts. Paschim Medinipur students embody *linguistic confidence rooted in exposure*, while Purba Medinipur students display *ambition fueled by imagination*. Both orientations are products of their sociocultural environments. English thus becomes not merely a subject but a lens through which learners interpret their place in the modern world.

The patterns across all tables demonstrate that bridging the proficiency–aspiration divide requires educational reform that combines equitable resource distribution with culturally sensitive pedagogy. As the findings align with Norton's (2013) theory of investment, the data affirm that learners invest in English not just for economic mobility but for identity construction and social belonging.

Table 1. Sample Distribution of Respondents

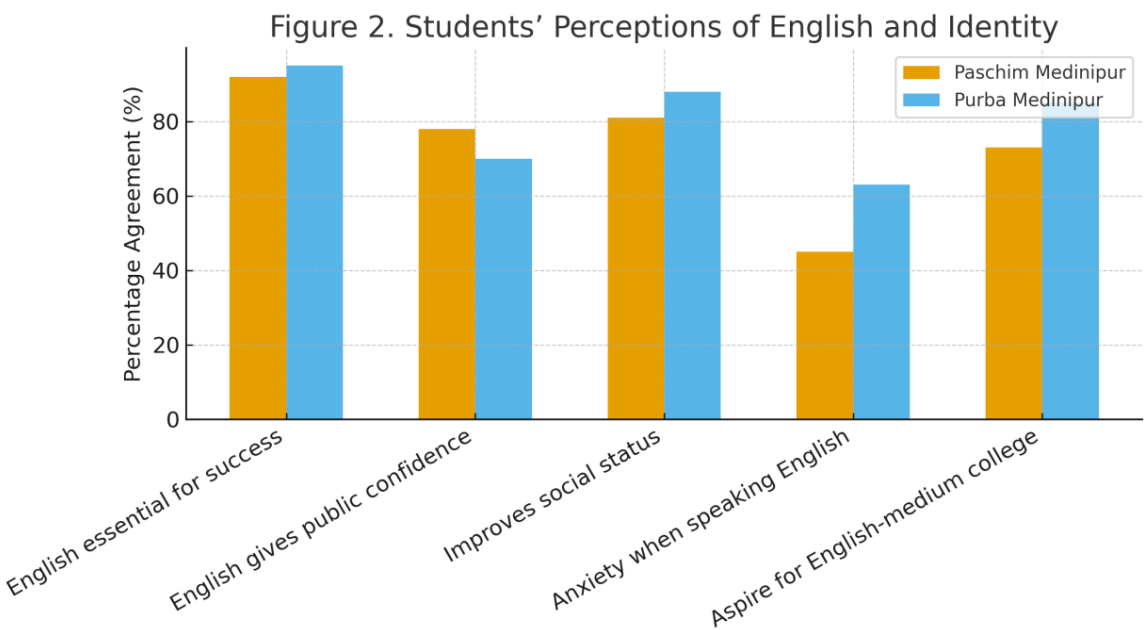
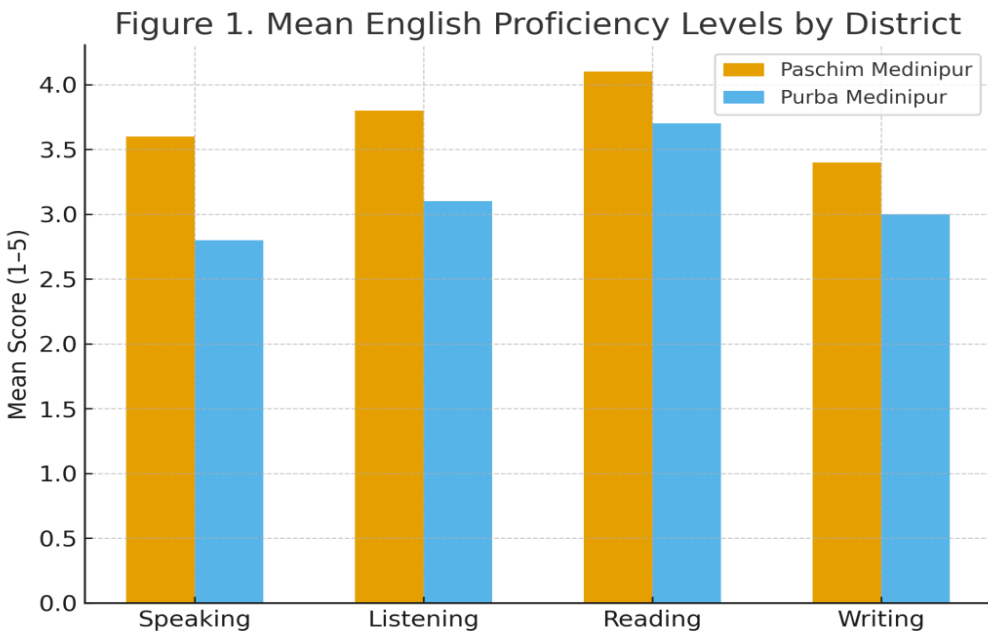
District	No. of Schools	Male Students	Female Students	Total Students
Paschim Medinipur	5	72	78	150
Purba Medinipur	5	68	82	150
Total	10	140	160	300

Table 2. English Proficiency and Exposure (Mean Scores)

Variable	Paschim Medinipur	Purba Medinipur	Mean Difference
Self-rated speaking ability (1–5 scale)	3.6	2.8	0.8
Listening comprehension (1–5 scale)	3.8	3.1	0.7
Reading ability (1–5 scale)	4.1	3.7	0.4
Writing ability (1–5 scale)	3.4	3.0	0.4
English exposure (hours/week)	7.5	4.2	3.3

Table 3. Students’ Perceptions of English and Identity (Percentage Agreement)

Statement	Paschim (%)	Purba (%)
English is essential for success in life	92	95
English gives me confidence in public	78	70
Speaking English improves social status	81	88
I feel anxious when speaking English	45	63
I want to study in an English-medium college	73	85



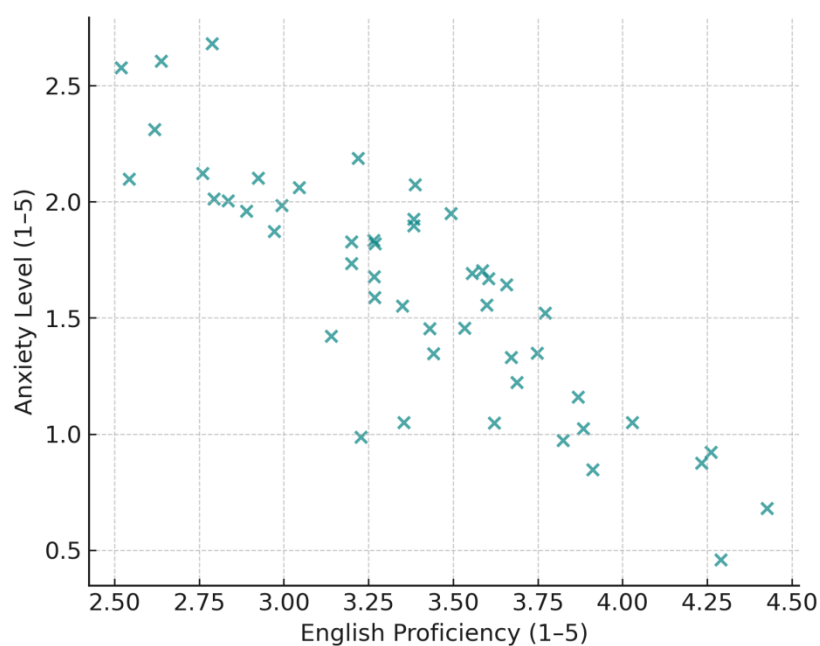


Fig. 3. Relationship between anxiety and proficiency

Table 4. Comparative Aspirational Categories

Aspirational Category	Paschim Medinipur(%)	Purba Medinipur(%)
Aspire for English-medium higher education	48	62
Aspire for jobs requiring English proficiency	57	71
Aspire for overseas or metro migration	26	38
Aspire to teach English	21	29

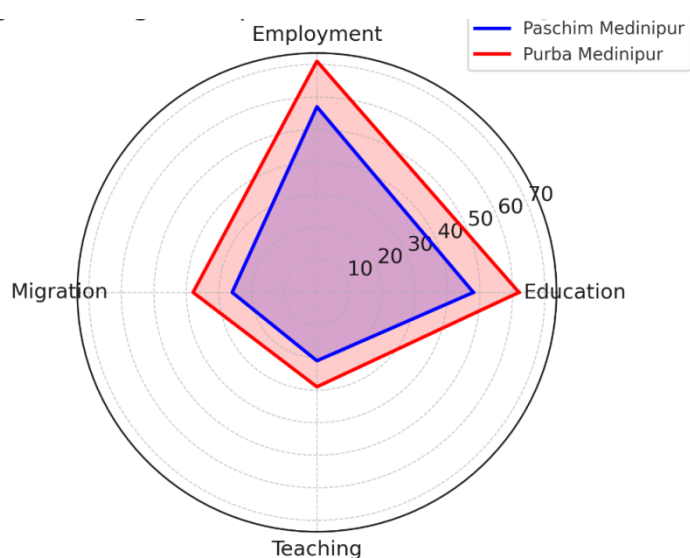


Fig. 4. English aspiration dimensions in districts

5.1.1 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlations (Table 5) indicated strong positive relationships among all constructs.

Table 5. Pearson correlations among constructs (pooled sample, N = 300)

Variable	1	2	3	4
Attitude toward English	—	.68 **	.59 **	.52 **
Self-perceived Proficiency		—	.55 **	.47 **
Aspirational Value			—	.61 **
Access to Resources				—

($p < .01$).

Students who perceived greater access to English resources tended to feel more proficient and displayed stronger positive attitudes.

Table 6. Correlation Matrix (Key Variables)

Variable Pair	r-value	Significance (p)
English proficiency ↔ Confidence	0.68	<0.01
English proficiency ↔ Aspiration index	0.61	<0.01
English exposure ↔ Socioeconomic background	0.47	<0.05
Anxiety ↔ English proficiency	-0.52	<0.01

5.1.2 Urban–Rural Sub-comparison

Cross-tabulation showed that within Paschim Medinipur, urban schools averaged 0.4 points higher in perceived proficiency than rural counterparts. In Purba Medinipur, the gap widened to 0.6 points, highlighting compounded disadvantage for rural learners.

5.1.3 Gender Trends

Female students across districts displayed marginally higher *Aspirational Value* ($M = 4.34$) than males ($M = 4.22$), though the difference was not significant ($t(238) = 1.21$, $p = .23$). Interview data, however, suggested gendered nuances in self-expression and confidence (see § 5.2.3).

5.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews and FGDs yielded five overarching themes representing students' perceptions of English in identity and aspiration.

Theme 1: English as a Symbol of Modern Identity

Across districts, learners positioned English as “the language of smartness.” Statements such as “*If you can speak English, people respect you*” (Paschim Student P5) and “*English shows we are modern, not backward villagers*” (Purba Student E7) revealed how linguistic practice signified modernity.

Students from Paschim Medinipur, exposed to urban industries and digital networks, described English as integral to self-presentation: *“I post captions in English because it feels professional.”* Conversely, Purba Medinipur respondents often saw English as aspirational but distant—*“a language of city people.”*

This theme supports Bourdieu’s (1991) view of linguistic capital: proficiency becomes an embodied form of distinction. English grants symbolic membership in imagined urban-global communities.

Theme 2: English as an Instrument of Mobility

Both groups linked English to access to higher education, employment, and migration. A Paschim student remarked, *“To work in IT or go abroad, English is the key.”* Similarly, a Purba student noted, *“Without English, you cannot even fill online forms.”*

However, differences emerged in opportunity perception. Paschim students had greater exposure to English through tuition, media, and internet access. Purba students lamented inadequate teaching quality—*“We memorize grammar rules but cannot speak.”* These disparities mirror the quantitative resource gap (Table 1) and illustrate the structural mediation of aspiration.

Theme 3: The Emotional Landscape—Pride and Anxiety

Emotional ambivalence characterised learners’ relationship with English. While proud to learn it, many feared ridicule for mispronunciation. A Purba girl confessed, *“If I speak English wrong, classmates laugh.”* In contrast, a Paschim boy said, *“Even if I make mistakes, I try—teachers encourage us.”*

Such differences highlight classroom culture’s role in identity safety. Where teachers foster communicative risk-taking, learners integrate English into their evolving selves; where evaluation dominates, English remains an alien performance.

Theme 4: Gendered Negotiations of Self

Female participants frequently articulated English as empowerment. *“English gives me courage to talk to outsiders,”* said a Purba girl aspiring to nursing. Another added, *“If a girl knows English, parents think she is educated.”* For male students, English related more to employability than identity.

This divergence aligns with research showing that English acquisition may reshape gendered self-concepts in conservative settings (Kandiah, 2020). In Purba Medinipur’s semi-rural milieu, English becomes a subtle agent of social transformation for young women.

Theme 5: Classroom Ecology and Access

Observation data confirmed systemic inequalities. Paschim schools, especially private ones, offered multimedia resources, English-only zones, and teachers trained through online courses. Purba schools relied largely on translation and rote grammar. One teacher admitted, *“We teach English in Bengali because students don’t understand otherwise.”*

Students’ narratives corroborated these conditions: *“Our computer lab doesn’t work,” “Internet is slow,” “Teachers speak Bengali most of the time.”* The resource asymmetry explains differing self-perceived proficiency and confidence scores.

5.3 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Figure 1 summarizes how identity, aspiration, and access interact.

Access to Resources → Self-Perceived Proficiency: material input affects confidence.

Proficiency → Attitude → Aspirational Value: competence reinforces positive self-image and future orientation.

Sociocultural Context (district, gender, urbanity) moderates all relationships.

The model confirms that English functions as both a tool (*instrumental value*) and a mirror (*symbolic value*). In Paschim Medinipur, abundant resources reinforce positive identity loops; in Purba Medinipur, resource scarcity sustains feelings of linguistic inadequacy, limiting investment (Norton, 2013).

6. Discussion

6.1 English as Linguistic Capital and Cultural Currency

Findings reaffirm that English operates as high-value *linguistic capital* (Bourdieu, 1991). Students perceive it as convertible into educational and occupational success. Yet access to such capital remains unevenly distributed. Paschim Medinipur's infrastructural advantage translates into more confident identities; Purba Medinipur's learners, despite equal aspiration, face what Phillipson (2018) terms "linguistic disadvantage"—structural barriers that restrict agency. Hence, aspiration alone cannot bridge inequity. Institutional mechanisms—qualified teachers, digital tools, and communicative curricula—mediate the conversion of aspiration into achievement.

6.2 Identity Negotiation and Imagined Futures

Norton's (2013) concept of *investment* helps explain why Purba students, though desiring English competence, invest less actively: limited validation and opportunity make investment appear risky. Paschim students, conversely, inhabit classrooms that partially realize their "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983)—environments where English use is socially rewarded. For adolescents constructing self-identity, English symbolizes belonging to a modern, mobile India. Yet, the authenticity of that belonging depends on sustained access. Without equitable resources, English remains an *imagined* rather than *lived* identity.

6.3 Emotional Dimensions of Learning

The study surfaces affective realities often absent from policy discourse. Learners' pride and anxiety coexist, reflecting the duality of English as empowerment and judgment. Teachers' supportive feedback mitigates fear; punitive correction amplifies alienation. Teacher-training initiatives must therefore integrate socio-emotional competence: creating safe spaces for trial and error, valuing intelligibility over accent imitation, and affirming local bilingual identities (Canagarajah, 2012).

6.4 Gendered Aspirations and Transformative Potential

Gender-based patterns suggest that English carries emancipatory potential for girls in conservative rural contexts. Through English, they envision economic independence and broader interactional horizons. The language thus mediates identity not merely cognitively but socially—reshaping familial expectations. However, empowerment remains fragile without institutional reinforcement. School programs promoting female participation in communicative events, debate clubs, or digital literacy could consolidate English as a sustainable agent of change.

6.5 Policy and Pedagogical Implications

6.5.1 Toward Context-Responsive Pedagogy

Uniform curricula ignore contextual disparity. West Bengal's ELT policy should integrate localized materials reflecting regional culture while sustaining communicative objectives. Paschim schools could model resource-sharing with Purba counterparts via digital collaborations or teacher-exchange programs.

6.5.2 Bridging the Digital Divide

Given strong correlation between resource access and proficiency, investment in ICT infrastructure is urgent. Government schemes like *PM e-Vidya* could target semi-rural schools with stable connectivity and English learning platforms.

6.5.3 Re-defining Assessment

High-stakes written exams reinforce grammar-translation methods. Incorporating oral and project-based evaluation can legitimize communicative competence as a valued outcome, aligning identity construction with real-world language use.

6.6 Theoretical Contribution

Empirically, this study refines the nexus between *identity* and *aspiration* by foregrounding regional inequality. It demonstrates that investment in English is not purely individual but structurally conditioned. Theoretically, it extends Norton's framework through an Indian district-level lens, showing how limited capital constrains identity options. Moreover, it complicates Bourdieu's capital theory by revealing affective components: anxiety and pride co-constitute value. English's power derives as much from emotion and imagination as from economics.

6.7 Limitations

Despite careful design, certain limitations remain:

- **Sample scope:** Four schools per district cannot capture entire regional heterogeneity.
- **Self-report bias:** Students may overstate positive attitudes toward English due to perceived prestige.
- **Cross-sectional design:** Longitudinal tracking could better trace evolving identity investments.
- **Language mediation:** Interviews conducted partly in Bengali may have nuanced responses differently.

Future research should involve longitudinal ethnography and teacher-student co-analysis to observe how identity positions shift through schooling stages.

6. Conclusion and Educational Implications

This comparative study of secondary school students in Paschim and Purba Medinipur reveals that English has become a defining element of students' aspirations and emerging identities. While both districts show a growing recognition of English as a tool for success, the nature and depth of engagement differ substantially. Paschim Medinipur students demonstrate higher functional proficiency and confidence, primarily due to better exposure and resource availability, whereas Purba Medinipur students exhibit aspirational enthusiasm but more anxiety and limited practical opportunity. The findings emphasize that English in rural and semi-urban Bengal operates as a symbolic marker of mobility and modernity. Students do not merely learn English for academic purposes but associate it with imagined futures — higher education, employability, and social prestige. The research underscores how the "identity of the English learner" in these contexts is fluid, aspirational, and situated at the intersection of global and local cultural capital. From an educational perspective, the study highlights the need for context-sensitive English pedagogy. Teachers must integrate identity-affirming practices that allow learners to see English not as an imposition but as a means to express local thought in global discourse. Classroom strategies that incorporate local experiences, mother-tongue

support, and learner autonomy can reduce the psychological distance between students and the English language.

Furthermore, systemic interventions—such as teacher training in communicative pedagogy, resource-sharing between districts, and the integration of technology-based English learning modules—can bridge the gap between aspiration and achievement. The comparative findings from Midnapore suggest that equitable language education policies can play a transformative role in rural educational development. In essence, English in the Midnapore region functions as both a gateway and a mirror—a gateway to future opportunities and a mirror reflecting how learners see themselves in a rapidly globalizing India. Students’ voices from Paschim and Purba Medinipur collectively affirm that English, though external in origin, is internalized as part of their selfhood and social mobility journey. The duality of aspiration and anxiety underscores the complexity of English education in postcolonial societies: it empowers, yet differentiates; it opens doors, yet demands negotiation of identity. Sustaining motivation and inclusivity in English classrooms therefore requires educators to recognize the cultural and emotional layers underlying language learning. When pedagogical practices align with students’ aspirations and sociocultural realities, English transforms from a subject of study into a language of possibility—a means through which learners imagine, articulate, and achieve their futures.

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Citation: Jash. S., (2025) “English, Identity and Aspiration: How Secondary Students in Midnapore Districts View English in Their Lives”, *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-3, Issue-10, October-2025.