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Challenges of Studying Language Loss in Marginalized Communities: Methodological Reflections from Bangladesh

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the methodological challenges of researching language loss in marginalized communities in Bangladesh, particularly among indigenous populations in Sherpur Sadar Upazila. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study engaged 197 participants through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. The research revealed barriers such as translation inconsistencies, gendered participation gaps, a lack of inclusive tools for individuals with disabilities, and ethical complexities in obtaining informed consent. These challenges are significant because they reflect broader patterns of exclusion in both academic research and language policy. Findings highlight the need for more inclusive, adaptive, and ethically grounded methods to ensure equitable representation in linguistic research. The study contributes to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by advocating for accessible, culturally sensitive research practices. It also holds educational relevance by informing inclusive methodologies and curricula in language studies, sociolinguistics, and special education research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language loss among indigenous communities in Bangladesh is a growing concern, closely linked to social, educational, and institutional exclusion (Chakma & Sultana, 2024). As national language policies continue to prioritize Bengali and English for education, governance, and social mobility, minority languages are increasingly endangered. Many community members are unable to learn their native languages, let alone English, due to structural and systemic barriers. This erosion of linguistic diversity affects more than just communication; it threatens identity, cultural continuity, and equitable access to resources and services.

While scholars have made significant progress in documenting endangered languages, conducting research in marginalized communities presents distinct methodological challenges (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023). Fieldwork in linguistically and geographically excluded areas is often constrained by the absence of standardized orthographies, bilingual tools, and institutional support. These challenges are intensified by varying literacy levels, infrastructural limitations, and the socio-political sensitivities that surround ethnic identity and language use. Traditional methodologies often fall short in capturing the full spectrum of community voices, especially when they fail to adapt to cultural and linguistic contexts (Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al*., 2018).

An especially underexplored aspect of linguistic fieldwork is the inclusion of individuals with special needs. Many people with cognitive, sensory, or physical disabilities are systematically excluded from research not due to irrelevance, but because of methodological limitations that fail to accommodate diverse communication forms. This exclusion perpetuates broader societal gaps in both language revitalization efforts and inclusive education (Hasan *et al*., 2022; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). Without accessible tools or disability-informed ethical frameworks, linguistic research risks reinforcing the very inequalities it seeks to address.

Social norms related to gender and age further restrict participation. Women, particularly in conservative rural areas, often require male permission to speak in public or participate in interviews. Elders, although viewed as language custodians, may decline participation due to physical limitations or mistrust of outsiders (Reza & Ullah, 2023; Jacobs-Huey, 2002). These dynamics affect who participates, what stories are told, and how accurately a community's linguistic situation is represented.

Based on our previous studies (Karmaker, 2005a; Karmaker, 2023a; Karmaker, 2023b; Karmaker, 2025b; Karmaker, 2025c; Karmaker, 2025d; Karmaker & Lemon, 2024), this study explores these intersecting challenges through fieldwork conducted in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, a linguistically diverse region where indigenous communities face significant marginalization. The research investigates how conventional research practices intersect with field-based realities such as accessibility, cultural norms, and representation. By reflecting on issues related to special needs inclusion, gendered dynamics, and ethical engagement, this study contributes to more flexible, inclusive, and context-sensitive approaches to language research. These reflections support the broader goals of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by advocating for equitable participation and inclusive methodologies in linguistic and educational inquiry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of language loss among indigenous communities is often complicated by the very conditions that contribute to linguistic endangerment—namely, marginalization, limited educational access, and systemic neglect in policy and practice (Karmaker & Lemon, 2024). In

the context of Bangladesh, these issues are further exacerbated by entrenched inequalities that prevent minority language speakers from participating fully in formal education, media representation, and public decision-making (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023). As a result, not only do these communities experience linguistic decline, but they are also severely underrepresented in academic discourse.

Existing literature emphasizes the importance of ethnographic and participatory approaches to studying language loss. However, practical implementation in Bangladesh remains difficult due to logistical, linguistic, and institutional barriers. Researchers often encounter challenges such as limited access to remote areas, the absence of bilingual facilitators, and a lack of standardized tools for documenting indigenous languages (Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al.*, 2018). These factors hinder the meaningful inclusion of marginalized populations, particularly those with minimal exposure to formal education or research environments, raising critical concerns aligned with SDG 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and learning opportunities for all.

A largely overlooked dimension in this field is the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. While studies frequently discuss geographic, cultural, or economic marginalization, very few address how disability intersects with language endangerment. Members of ethnic communities who experience hearing, speech, or cognitive impairments often face multiple layers of exclusion, not only from mainstream society but also from language revitalization efforts. Their experiences are missing due to the absence of inclusive data collection tools and limited researcher awareness about disability-inclusive practices (Hasan et al., 2022; Sadi, 2021). This gap highlights the need for more socially responsive methodologies, consistent with the principles of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which aims to empower and promote the inclusion of all, irrespective of ability.

Gender and age also play significant roles in shaping participation in linguistic research. Women and elders often serve as key transmitters of indigenous languages, yet cultural restrictions may prevent them from participating freely in interviews or discussions. In rural Bangladesh, female participants frequently require approval from male relatives or community leaders to engage in public dialogue, creating an imbalance in representation (Akuffo, 2024; Reza & Ullah, 2023). Similarly, elderly speakers (although rich sources of linguistic knowledge) may be physically unable or reluctant to engage, especially if they harbor mistrust stemming from historical or political marginalization.

Technology has been identified as a potential solution to some of these access barriers. Mobile devices, social media, and digital audio tools offer new opportunities for remote documentation and community-based dissemination. However, a persistent digital divide remains, particularly in rural or indigenous regions where internet infrastructure is weak and digital literacy is low. People with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged due to inaccessible user interfaces and a lack of adapted digital tools (Hasan *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, the literature underscores an urgent need to reform linguistic fieldwork practices. Future research must prioritize inclusive, ethically sound, and culturally sensitive methodologies. This includes adapting research instruments for different literacy and cognitive levels, ensuring gender-sensitive designs, and developing mechanisms for equitable participation across generations and ability spectrums. Doing so would enhance the validity of linguistic research while contributing to more just and representative knowledge production, outcomes that directly support both SDG 4 and SDG 10.

3. METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to explore the challenges of researching language loss among marginalized indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Fieldwork was conducted in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, a region characterized by both rural and urban indigenous populations facing linguistic exclusion. The area was selected based on its ethnic diversity, variations in educational access, and rich cultural heritage.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with relevant experiences related to language use, cultural practices, and the accessibility of linguistic resources. A total of 197 individuals participated in the study, comprising 165 respondents from structured surveys, 12 interviewees, and 20 individuals who took part in focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants included teachers, cultural leaders, indigenous language speakers, and individuals with limited access to formal education systems.

The survey instrument featured 16 Likert-scale items that examined perceptions of language loss, experiences of exclusion, and access to education. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain deeper insights into participants' lived experiences, linguistic practices, and obstacles to participation in both community life and research settings. FGDs were organized to explore intergenerational and collective perspectives on traditional language use, changes over time, and attitudes toward language preservation.

Deliberate efforts were made to include underrepresented voices, such as women, elders, and individuals with special needs. However, the research team encountered several challenges. The lack of inclusive research instruments, such as visual aids or sign language support, limited the participation of people with hearing, speech, or cognitive impairments. This reflects a broader methodological gap in language research, where disability accommodation is often overlooked. These constraints are especially concerning in light of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which promotes inclusion regardless of physical or cognitive ability.

All qualitative data were analyzed thematically, with a focus on patterns of exclusion, power dynamics, and logistical barriers during fieldwork. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. For participants who were illiterate or had special communication needs, verbal consent was obtained, and the study's purpose and procedures were explained with the support of local facilitators. This commitment to accessibility aligns with the ethical goals of SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and lifelong learning for all.

The methodology demonstrates the complex realities of conducting language research in marginalized settings. It underscores the need for flexible, community-centered, and disability-aware research practices that respect cultural norms while promoting equity and authenticity in data collection.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research revealed multiple challenges in studying language loss among marginalized communities in Bangladesh, particularly in contexts where cultural, linguistic, and physical barriers intersect. While participants were generally receptive, accessing representative voices (especially among women, elders, and individuals with special needs) was constrained by real-world field conditions.

A primary barrier was language itself. Many participants lacked fluency in Bengali, yet most research tools, including surveys and consent forms, were originally developed in Bengali due to institutional constraints. This affected participants' comprehension and potentially

compromised informed consent. Although translations were provided during interviews and FGDs, there was a lack of standardized materials and trained bilingual facilitators, leading to inconsistencies and communication gaps (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019).

Engaging individuals with special needs proved particularly difficult. Despite the study's inclusive intentions, there was a notable absence of accessible formats or disability-adapted methods. Hearing, speech, and cognitive impairments were prevalent but unsupported due to a lack of interpreter services, visual aids, or alternative communication systems. This exclusion is emblematic of a larger issue in language research: people with disabilities are often marginalized not due to irrelevance, but because methodological tools do not accommodate their needs (Hasan *et al*., 2022; Bhuiyan, 2016). Addressing this issue is vital for realizing the objectives of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and ensuring that linguistic research reflects the diversity within communities.

Cultural norms and social hierarchies created additional obstacles. Female participants were often underrepresented in interviews and FGDs, primarily due to traditional gender roles, domestic responsibilities, and social discomfort in mixed-gender settings. In some cases, male guardians acted as intermediaries, raising concerns about autonomy and data authenticity. Similar challenges affected elders, who, despite being key language bearers, sometimes declined to participate due to physical limitations or political apprehensions rooted in historical marginalization (Rahman, 2023; Haque *et al*., 2018; Reza & Ullah, 2023).

Logistical issues further impacted the fieldwork. Poor road access, intermittent mobile networks, and weather disruptions hindered communication and follow-up, particularly in remote villages. Limited institutional support and infrastructure gaps reduced the feasibility of returning to locations for verification or deeper engagement (Correa & Pavez, 2016). These constraints underscore the need for localized, sustainable research partnerships with community-based organizations and schools, aligning with the participatory ideals of SDG 4 (Quality Education).

From an ethical standpoint, informed consent requires adaptation. Many participants were either illiterate or unfamiliar with research procedures. As a result, verbal consent and repeated explanation were essential, especially for elders and individuals with disabilities. While local facilitators were instrumental in this process, concerns remained regarding interpretation accuracy and participant confidentiality.

Overall, the study highlights a persistent gap between methodological ideals and practical realities when conducting field research among linguistically and socially marginalized groups. While frameworks emphasize representation, equity, and ethical rigor, their implementation often falters under real-world conditions. The limited inclusion of people with disabilities in particular reveals the urgent need to develop adaptive tools and training for researchers working in cross-cultural and low-resource settings (Ghahramani *et al*., 2020; Mokikwa & Mokhele-Ramulumo, 2024).

The findings contribute to a growing recognition that research in linguistically endangered contexts must evolve. It should not only capture language use and loss but also reflect structural barriers, cultural sensitivities, and the intersectionality of identity, ability, and voice. By foregrounding these challenges, the study offers critical methodological insights and promotes a shift toward inclusive, SDG-aligned, and community-engaged research practices in sociolinguistics and educational policy (Hehir, 2002).

5. CONCLUSION

Researching language loss among marginalized communities in Bangladesh requires more than traditional linguistic fieldwork; it demands a research paradigm that is inclusive, adaptive, and ethically grounded. This study has demonstrated that structural barriers, such as language inaccessibility, cultural gatekeeping, and the methodological exclusion of people with disabilities, significantly affect the scope, depth, and fairness of linguistic research.

While community engagement is vital, true inclusion remains limited when research tools and frameworks are not designed to support linguistic diversity, accessibility, or social equity. These insights are particularly relevant to SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes inclusive education for all, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which calls for the empowerment and representation of marginalized voices.

The study underscores the need to reframe language research practices to include those most often excluded, women, elders, and people with disabilities. Their experiences are not peripheral but central to understanding how language functions within and across social systems. Excluding them not only weakens data integrity but also risks reinforcing the very inequalities that research should challenge.

To move forward, researchers must prioritize participatory and culturally responsive methodologies. This includes training local facilitators, developing tools tailored to low-literacy and special needs contexts, and applying flexible ethical protocols that adapt to varied cultural realities. These approaches will not only yield richer, more authentic data but also help bridge the gap between academic inquiry and community empowerment.

Ultimately, this study affirms that language preservation is inseparable from educational justice and social inclusion. By situating linguistic research within the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, scholars and practitioners can contribute to more equitable, ethical, and impactful language policies and practices, ensuring that every voice, regardless of ability or background, has a place in the story of language and identity.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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