



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

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ABSTRACT

EStudying language loss among marginalized communities presents unique methodological challenges, particularly in contexts like Bangladesh where structural exclusion, linguistic barriers, and cultural sensitivities intersect. This study explores field-based limitations encountered while researching indigenous language decline in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, highlighting the practical difficulties of engaging participants who face multiple forms of marginalization, including those with special needs. Drawing from mixed-methods data, the research reflects on access limitations, translation inconsistencies, gendered participation gaps, and the ethical complexities of informed consent. Additional challenges were observed in reaching individuals with disabilities, as most research tools were not adapted to their communication needs. Social norms further limited participation from women and elders, even though they are central to language transmission. The study concludes that inclusive and flexible research practices—grounded in ethical awareness and cultural sensitivity—are essential for capturing authentic and diverse linguistic realities. These reflections offer critical insights for future language research in underrepresented populations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language loss among indigenous communities in Bangladesh is a growing concern, deeply tied to social, educational, and institutional exclusion (Karmaker, 2005; Chakma & Sultana, 2024). As dominant language policies continue to prioritize Bengali in education and governance, ethnic minority languages are increasingly endangered. The consequences extend beyond communication, impacting identity, cultural continuity, and access to services. While researchers have made important contributions to documenting this loss, studying language in marginalized communities presents unique methodological challenges (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023).

Field research in linguistically marginalized areas often encounters barriers such as lack of standardized orthographies, absence of bilingual tools, and minimal institutional support. These challenges are further intensified by the inaccessibility of remote areas, varying literacy levels among participants, and the socio-political sensitivities surrounding ethnic identity and language. Traditional research approaches may fail to capture the full range of community voices, especially when methods do not adapt to cultural or linguistic contexts (Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al.*, 2018).

One critical but underexplored aspect of linguistic research in marginalized communities is the inclusion of individuals with special needs. In many cases, people with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities are excluded from research, not because of disinterest or irrelevance, but due to methodological limitations that fail to accommodate diverse forms of communication. Their exclusion reflects broader structural gaps in both language preservation efforts and academic inquiry (Hasan *et al.*, 2022; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). Without inclusive tools or ethical frameworks tailored to disability contexts, such individuals remain underrepresented in studies that aim to speak on behalf of entire communities.

In addition to disability, social norms related to gender and age also influence participation in language research. Elders, while often regarded as the custodians of indigenous language, may face physical limitations or lack trust in research institutions. Women, especially in conservative rural areas, are sometimes discouraged from participating or must seek permission from male family members to speak. These cultural dynamics shape whose voices are heard and whose are left out, thereby influencing both the process and outcomes of linguistic fieldwork (Reza & Ullah, 2023; Jacobs-Huey, 2002).

This study reflects on these methodological challenges through data collected in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, where diverse indigenous communities face language endangerment. The aim is to examine how traditional research practices intersect with field-based realities, including accessibility, cultural norms, and participant representation. By integrating reflections on special needs inclusion, gender dynamics, and ethical engagement, this paper contributes to more inclusive, flexible, and socially responsive approaches to language research in marginalized settings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of language loss among indigenous communities is often complicated by the very conditions that contribute to linguistic endangerment—marginalization, limited access to education, and systemic neglect in policy and practice. In the context of Bangladesh, these challenges are compounded by structural inequalities that exclude minority language speakers from formal education, media representation, and government recognition (Sultana, 2023; Awal, 2019; Rahman, 2023). These exclusions affect not only language vitality

but also access to research, as many indigenous populations remain underrepresented in academic discourse.

Existing literature emphasizes the importance of studying language loss from an ethnographic and participatory perspective. However, the practical implementation of such approaches in Bangladesh faces substantial barriers. Language researchers often struggle with access to remote communities, a lack of bilingual facilitators, and the absence of standardized tools for indigenous language documentation (Bhuiyan, 2016; Haque *et al.*, 2018). These gaps hinder meaningful participation from marginalized groups, particularly those with limited formal education or exposure to research processes.

Another overlooked dimension in language research is the inclusion of individuals with special needs. While many studies focus on cultural, geographic, or economic marginalization, there is limited discussion of how disability intersects with language loss. Individuals with cognitive, hearing, or speech impairments within ethnic communities may experience compounded exclusion—not only from mainstream society but also from the very efforts meant to document or preserve their linguistic heritage. Their perspectives are often absent due to methodological constraints, including inaccessible data collection tools and limited awareness among researchers (Hasan *et al.*, 2022; Sadi, 2021).

Gender and age-related dynamics further complicate participation in language-related fieldwork. Women and elders are often the primary transmitters of indigenous languages, yet cultural norms may limit their ability to participate freely in interviews or group discussions. This gendered imbalance is especially relevant in conservative rural communities where female voices are filtered through male relatives or community gatekeepers (Akuffo, 2024; Reza & Ullah, 2023). Consequently, the data collected may not fully represent the experiences of those most actively engaged in language use and preservation.

Technology has been cited as a tool with the potential to overcome some access issues in fieldwork. Mobile devices and social media platforms provide opportunities for documentation, remote participation, and dissemination of research outputs. However, digital divides persist across rural and indigenous areas in Bangladesh, and special needs individuals are often left behind due to lack of accessible tech design or digital literacy training (Hasan *et al.*, 2022).

The literature underscores the urgent need for more inclusive, ethically aware, and context-sensitive methodologies in studying language loss among marginalized populations. This includes adapting tools for diverse cognitive and communication needs, ensuring gender-sensitive research design, and promoting equitable participation across generations and ability levels. By addressing these limitations, researchers can help make linguistic research more representative, actionable, and socially just.

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. The research was conducted in Sherpur Sadar Upazila, where both rural and urban indigenous populations face linguistic exclusion. The area was selected for its diversity of ethnic groups, varied access to education, and cultural richness.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who could provide relevant insights into language use, cultural practices, and the accessibility of linguistic resources. A total of 197 participants took part in the study, including 165 respondents from structured surveys, 12 interviewees, and 20 individuals involved in focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants

included teachers, cultural leaders, ethnic language speakers, and individuals with limited access to formal education systems.

The survey instrument was designed with 16 Likert-scale items focused on perceptions of language loss, exclusion, and educational access. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather deeper insights into language practices and barriers to participation in community and research settings. FGDs enabled the exploration of group dynamics, especially in relation to traditional language use, generational change, and attitudes toward language preservation.

Special effort was made to include underrepresented voices such as elders, women, and individuals with special needs. However, limitations in accessibility—such as the absence of inclusive materials or trained interpreters—posed ethical and methodological challenges. Some participants with disabilities were identified during the field visits, but a lack of adapted instruments limited their full participation.

All qualitative data were analysed thematically, focusing on patterns of exclusion, power dynamics, and fieldwork limitations. Ethical procedures were followed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and the protection of participant confidentiality. In cases where participants were illiterate or had special communication needs, verbal consent and additional explanation were provided with the help of local facilitators.

The methodology reflects the complexity of conducting inclusive language research in marginalized communities. It also highlights the need for flexible and culturally responsive approaches when working with populations that face both linguistic and social barriers.

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 overlap. Although participants were open and responsive, the process of accessing representative voices—especially among women, the elderly, and individuals with special needs—proved to be complex and constrained by several field-level realities.

One of the primary challenges was the language barrier itself. Many participants lacked fluency in Bengali, yet research tools such as surveys and consent forms were initially drafted in Bengali due to institutional constraints. This led to difficulties in ensuring that respondents fully understood their rights and the scope of participation. In some cases, translation into indigenous languages was necessary during interviews and focus group discussions, but there were no standardized materials or trained bilingual assistants available, which limited consistency and clarity in communication ([Sultana, 2023](#); [Awal, 2019](#)).

Participants with special needs, including hearing, speech, and cognitive impairments, were particularly difficult to engage. While the research design aimed to be inclusive, the absence of accessible formats and the lack of local expertise in disability-inclusive research created significant methodological limitations. This reflects a broader issue in linguistic fieldwork—people with disabilities are often excluded from research due to assumptions about communication ability or logistical complexity, even though their experiences may offer unique insights into language use, exclusion, and resilience ([Hasan et al., 2022](#); [Bhuiyan, 2016](#)).

Additionally, cultural norms and social hierarchies created further barriers. Women were often underrepresented in interviews and FGDs because of traditional roles, household responsibilities, or discomfort in mixed-gender group settings. In some cases, male guardians

acted as intermediaries for female participants, raising concerns about autonomy and data authenticity. Similarly, elders, who are key language carriers, were sometimes unwilling to speak openly due to political concerns or distrust of researchers, especially in communities that have experienced historical marginalization ([Rahman, 2023](#); [Haque et al., 2018](#)).

Logistical challenges such as poor road access, lack of internet infrastructure, and unpredictable weather also affected the data collection process in remote areas. These environmental conditions hindered timely coordination and follow-ups, particularly in areas where participants had limited access to phones or digital tools. The lack of institutional support for reaching remote communities further limited the inclusiveness of the fieldwork ([Correa & Pavez, 2016](#); [Reza & Ullah, 2023](#)).

From an ethical perspective, the process of obtaining informed consent posed difficulties. Literacy barriers required verbal consent, and the researchers needed to take additional steps to explain participant rights. In some cases, local translators helped mediate this process, but concerns remained regarding confidentiality and translation accuracy. These issues were especially critical for participants with disabilities or those unfamiliar with research norms.

Overall, the study highlights a persistent gap between research design and real-world field conditions when studying marginalized populations. While methodological guidelines emphasize representation and equity, practical implementation remains a challenge in linguistically and socially complex environments. The inclusion of special needs individuals added an important but underexplored dimension, revealing the need for more adaptable, inclusive, and culturally sensitive research practices in language preservation studies ([Ghahramani et al., 2020](#); [Mokikwa & Mokhele-Ramulumo, 2024](#)).

5. CONCLUSION

Researching language loss among marginalized communities in Bangladesh requires more than traditional linguistic fieldwork—it demands an inclusive, adaptive, and ethically grounded approach. This study has shown that structural barriers such as linguistic inaccessibility, cultural gatekeeping, and underrepresentation of special needs individuals significantly affect the scope and depth of field-based research. While community engagement is essential, actual inclusion remains limited when research tools and frameworks are not designed for diverse populations.

The experiences from the field underscore the need to reframe language research practices to include those who are most often excluded—people with disabilities, women, and elders. Their insights are critical to understanding how language functions within social and cultural systems, and their exclusion weakens both the data and its relevance.

To move forward, researchers must adopt participatory methods, train local facilitators, adapt tools for accessibility, and prioritize ethical engagement. Only then can linguistic research truly reflect the diversity and complexity of marginalized communities.

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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