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A systematic review of factors influencing English language competency for ethnic minority students: an ecological systems theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

The English language is a catalyst for economic growth, modernization, and globalization. In this milieu, English language competency—defined as the practical ability to use English effectively in diverse contexts, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, and intercultural skills—is recognized as an essential skill (Amor et al., 2023). Research on English language competency among ethnic minority students is sparse, obscuring the dynamics between personal and environmental factors. We analyzed factors influencing language competency, examining the interplay across the theory's five system levels using 82 research papers published from 2014 to 2024. The three factors most commonly discussed were at the individual level (psychological factors), the microsystem level (teachers and family), and the macrosystem level (language policies, socio-cultural influences, and identity). Our analysis also revealed the importance of conducting thorough studies at various levels. These include the microsystem level, which involves examining the interactions between teachers, families, and students and the challenges faced in practical cooperation between parents, educators, and students. Additionally, the mesosystem level, which focuses on digital learning tools, the exosystem level, which considers factors such as socioeconomic status and mass media, and the chronosystem level, referring to discrete shifts like switching from a monolingual to a multilingual environment, are also crucial areas of study. The study ends with research directions highlighting the necessity for a holistic examination of the factors influencing EFL learning among ethnic minorities, and the need for future research to include broader and more diverse samples for a comprehensive cross-cultural analysis.

IMPACT STATEMENT

As the world grows more interconnected, English competency becomes a gateway to global participation and economic advancement. However, for ethnic minority students, especially in remote areas, achieving language competency is a multifaceted journey shaped by a myriad of factors. Our systematic review, spanning a decade of research, sheds light on how psychological attributes, family support, educational tools, and societal influences converge to affect English learning. We emphasize the need for a holistic approach that considers the complex interplay of personal motivation, digital learning environments, and cultural identity. This study not only identifies the challenges faced by these students but also charts a path for future research to enhance our understanding and support of their linguistic journey. By recognizing the diverse elements at play, we can better tailor educational strategies to empower every student to reach their full potential in the global community.

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Introduction

The accelerated process of globalization and the increasing frequency of cross-cultural interactions have clearly contributed to the surge in English language learning (Getie and Popescu, 2020). English as a language is increasingly valued by all countries and its mastery is essential for active participation in globalized competition. Cummins (1979) had an interdependence hypothesis and a dynamic systems theory. They support the idea that being multilingual is good for cognitive and academic learning. Language education should encourage using the full range of language skills (Cummins, 1979). Also, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development says it's important to give quality education and lifelong learning chances to everyone. That includes women, minorities, people with disabilities, and kids in tough situations. Besides, Balboni (2018) pointed out the role of language in cultural identity and international communication, and the need for language education that isn't tied to just one culture. In this context, improving the English language proficiency of ethnic minority students is essential to promote equality and ensure access to economic and educational opportunities and active participation in globalized competition. Therefore, there is a need to collect and summarize current research on the English language proficiency of ethnic minorities, which will help us to better understand the current situation of foreign language learning among marginalized groups.

Language competency encompasses a person's ability to recognize and express the world, society and culture, self and others through listening, speaking, reading and writing. It includes language awareness and the sense of language developed through participation in the language system, socio-cultural conditions and language functions (Council of Europe, 2001). The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in China (2022 Edition) emphasize the significance of language proficiency, which is demonstrated through the application of both verbal and non-verbal knowledge, as well as diverse strategies for engaging in language activities tailored to specific contexts (Li et al., 2023).

The communicative competence model also reflects that language competency is not only about producing syntactically accurate sentences, but also about skillfully and appropriately using language in various social situations (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Therefore, language learning is intrinsically linked to the ecology of the learner's environment and cannot be separated from the social context in which it occurs (Chong et al., 2023). According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), individual development is shaped by the dynamic interactions between five distinct but interconnected ecosystems: micro-systems, meso-systems, exosystems, macro-systems, and temporal systems. Each layer of this ecological model represents a critical developmental context that impacts the person at the center of these concentric layers. At the microsystem level, intimate relationships such as family bonds are implicated. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), factors such as teaching and learning environments, educators and educational resources play an important role in the formation of language proficiency. Mesosystems involve microsystem interactions. These interactions demonstrate how many educational environments, such as the family and school surroundings, affect language learning. The exosystem includes socioeconomic and social contexts far from English language learners. These factors affect English learners indirectly but significantly. The macrosystem reflects society's cultural ethos and English language education perspectives. Include policy frameworks and cultural identities. The chronosystem is concerned with the chronological dimension of development, tracking the progression of personal and societal changes over time, such as the transition from a single linguistic environment to a multilingual one. Understanding the complex web of familial, educational, communal, national, and global factors is critical for developing supportive English language learning environments, especially for ethnic minority children (Ma, 2022). To provide a comprehensive understanding of the language learning processes of ethnic minority students, this study aims to synthesize existing research on the factors that influence English language competency among these students, while also highlighting new directions for future investigation.

Ecological systems theory

Based on an ecological framework, individuals develop by engaging with different social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Viewed through an ecological lens, learning behaviors are understood

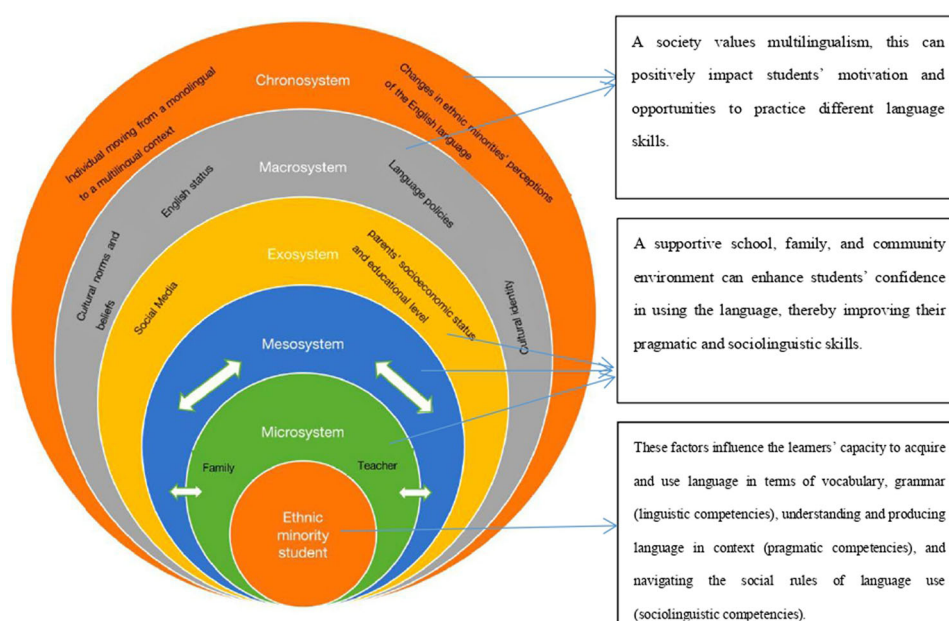


Figure 1. Factors affecting student's English language competency from an ecological perspective.

to emerge and interact within diverse settings. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework posits that a multitude of elements across distinct ecological strata are instrumental in molding individual issues and behaviors (Borrero & Yeh, 2010). These levels encompass the individual, family systems, community, and larger cultural and social environments. The current study adopts an ecological perspective, analyzing the different elements that influence the English language competency of multilingual students, and developing a comprehensive intervention strategy. The approach can then be applied to tackle the diverse environment of learning English as a student from an ethnic minority background, especially in areas with a high concentration of ethnic minority populations. Although personal diligence and traits play a role in academic achievements, they are not the exclusive determinants. The impact of societal and scholastic experiences, along with available resources, on educational results is also noteworthy (Crawford et al., 2020; Skinner et al., 2022).

Although the ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner has been widely used to understand the experiences of EFL learners in various educational and social settings, its application has mainly centered on EFL learners who are not part of ethnic minority groups. When applied to ethnic minority situations, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory highlights the significance of comprehending the numerous interrelated systems that impact ethnic minority learners' experiences (see Figure 1). This review study focuses on the elements that influence people's behaviors or perceptions by classifying all the factors in a subset of selected studies into five subsystems. This classification is guided by the inquiry: Which elements within the ecological framework influence the progression of English language competency among ethnic minority students?

Review methodology

Criteria for inclusion and exclusion

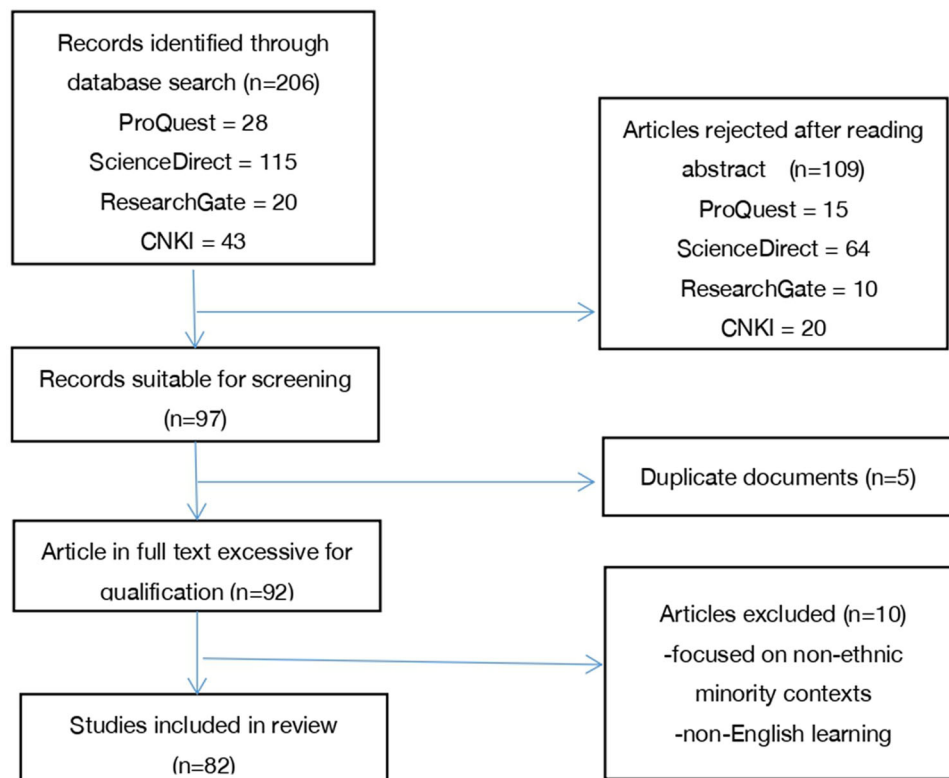
The subsequent criteria for inclusion and exclusion were considered while choosing studies that would be appropriate for the review. The requirements are exhaustively documented in depth in Table 1.

Search strategy

To establish a robust scholarly foundation, a systematic search was conducted across diverse electronic databases, encompassing a wide range of published articles relevant to the research topic on English language competency for ethnic minority students. The databases included ProQuest, Springer,

Table 1. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

Inclusion	Exclusion
Research topic and scope concerning the research question	The Research topic and scope are not aligned with the research
Research primarily centers around contexts involving ethnic minorities	Research does not focus on situations involving ethnic minorities
Qualitative and quantitative approaches, case studies, observations, action research, experimental studies, reports on the current state of the topic concerning the research questions, as well as conceptual and theoretical frameworks	Research lack a solid research design, such as concept papers and proposals
Research on English language acquisition	Studies conducted in a language other than English
Articles published from 2014 to 2024	

**Figure 2.** Stage-by-stage flowchart of literature search.

ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). Through extensive research, a total of 206 articles were gathered. From this vast collection, only the most pertinent studies were chosen for the review. Their potential relevance was assessed, and 134 were deemed irrelevant and subsequently excluded. During the search, terms like 'English language competency AND ethnic minority students' or 'English language competency AND ethnic minority areas' or 'English language learning AND developing areas' or 'English language learning AND remote areas' were utilized. The search was performed on 303 articles from the ProQuest database, resulting in 28 articles that contained relevant terms. 115 items were identified after a review of 1401 ScienceDirect articles. Out of the 179 articles that were searched on the ResearchGate database, a total of 20 articles were identified. After searching through 357 articles in CNKI, 43 were found to be relevant.

Every study that was found went through a rigorous, systematic screening procedure. Figure 2 illustrates the sequential stages of the literature search through the use of a flowchart that is derived from the PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009). Examining the titles and abstracts of the identified papers was the first stage in determining their significance. Out of the 206 articles that were reviewed, 114 abstracts were deemed irrelevant to the objectives of the review and were excluded. Out of the 92 records that were left, 10 were excluded from the review process because they did not expressly address scenarios involving ethnic minorities. 82 papers in all were ultimately chosen for examination.

Data extraction

Once the relevant articles were identified, the next step was to extract the necessary information. The data types to be extracted are determined by the review questions provided (Popay et al., 2006). This review focuses on the factors that impact students' English language competency in ethnic minority areas, using ecological systems theory. These factors include the individual aspects like motivation for learning and belief in one's abilities, the microsystem such as educators and family, the mesosystem which involves the interplay of e-learning in diverse linguistic settings, the exosystem covering broader influences like media and economic conditions, the macrosystem that includes norms around language education, cultural variances, and self-concept, as well as the chronosystem which accounts for personal life changes, for instance, transitioning from an environment of one language to one with multiple languages.

Results

To address the research question mentioned above, a systematic analysis was conducted on the selected 82 papers published in the relevant articles. The findings could be categorized as follows.

Distribution outcome variables concerning language competency

In this systematic review, we've organized the research articles in alignment with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework. The distribution is as follows: 15 articles address the individual level, another 15 tackle the microsystem, 9 explore the mesosystem, 9 delve into the exosystem, the largest group of 27 examines the macrosystem, and 7 focus on the chronosystem. The subsequent sections will elaborate on these findings, starting from the individual level and culminating with the chronosystem.

Psychological factors

Of all the individual-level components, 15 research have focused on psychological factors in chosen articles. As Peng and Song (2014) noted, ethnic minority students often face distinct challenges due to their unique cultural and learning environments, which differ markedly from those of the Han majority in China. The complexity of learning English is heightened for these students, not only because of environmental factors but also due to particular psychological needs such as motivation, resilience, and emotional support that are crucial for their success in language learning (Zhao & Wang, 2023).

The priority of learning English is determined by the motive behind it (Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Tu et al., 2022; Wang, 2016; Xuan et al., 2023; Yang, 2019). According to Jiao et al.'s study, there are four different types of motivation that affect how ethnic minority students learn English: natural curiosity, educational surroundings, personal growth, and international engagement. Teachers should consider their students' cultural background and language habits, make the classroom a happy and healthy place, get students interested in and motivated to learn, and help them reach their personal goals and aspirations to participate in international activities (Jiao et al., 2022). By research of Froiland and Worrell (2016), students are more motivated to learn English when they understand how important it is. This makes them want to improve their language skills all around (Froiland & Worrell, 2016). When teachers are teaching, they should make sure that their students understand how important it is to learn English and that they are motivated to do so. Also, extrinsic motivation is very important for learning a language. Students' external motivation to learn a language is affected by cultural and social pressures, peer recognition, parental expectations, and future job goals (Dunn & Iwaniec, 2022; Kim et al., 2018).

A lot of studies have also found a link between learning a language and feeling good about your own abilities (Ling et al., 2016). There is a strong link between high self-efficacy and constantly looking for ways to learn a language (Calafato, 2023). When students have high self-efficacy, they believe in their own language skills. This makes them more motivated to actively seek out opportunities to learn and more willing to take part in language practice activities like class discussions, speeches, and other similar activities to improve their ability to use language in real-life situations. Self-efficacy levels were different among students of different ethnic minority groups, the difference in self-efficacy may be influenced by factors such as family education background, cultural inheritance, social identity and historical experience. However, there were no

significant differences in how they dealt with problems, according to a study by Freire et al. (2020). This consistency in coping strategies may reflect a broader pattern of psychological adaptation. In order to support students' growth and development, educators need to know about their cultural background, family education style, and personal experiences. At the same time, teachers can learn from cross-cultural interventions that work with students of different cultures (Gebauer et al., 2021).

Although there have been advancements in the study about the correlation between motivation, attitude, self-efficacy, and language proficiency, certain areas still need to be well investigated. Anyichie and Butler (2023) have noted it is important to do further research on the correlation between instructors' instructional practices and students' motivation to identify effective pedagogical methods that may consistently maintain and improve learners' motivation in the long run.

Aspects of the microsystem

Interactions between people and their immediate environment comprise the micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is the degree of interaction where people are most influenced. The micro-system encompasses a range of variables that have a direct and significant impact on the English language competency of learners. These factors are characterized by their close proximity to the learner and their immediate impact on the learner's daily linguistic experiences and development. This review identified two main types of microsystem impacts on children from ethnic minority groups' English language competency. Each of the fifteen articles that were reviewed concentrated on the functions that the family and school environment perform in this respect.

Classroom practice

Teachers' roles and methods have a big impact on how well students from ethnic minority groups learn English (Erling et al., 2023; Hopp & Thoma, 2021; Krulatz et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019). First of all, from the perspective of the role of teachers, teachers' teaching purpose, teaching attitude and expectations for students will have an impact on students' English learning. For example, in some ethnic minority areas, English teachers often set the teaching purpose solely as further study, while ignoring the cultural knowledge behind English language learning and the ability to stimulate students' cross-cultural communication. Secondly, when it comes to teaching techniques, teachers' teaching methods and the use of teaching resources will directly affect students' learning results. In ethnic minority areas, due to the relative lack of teaching conditions and teaching facilities, some English teachers may still adopt traditional teaching methods, such as grammatical teaching approach. Babinski et al. (2018) deeply revealed the dynamic relationship between teaching practice and students' knowledge acquisition.

They showed that good teachers can help their students understand and remember what they have learned. But for students from ethnic minority groups, the impact of teaching is often limited by challenges like insufficient educational resources, language barriers, cultural differences and inconsistent student motivation (Gu, 2018). Research by Parkhouse et al. (2019) suggests that with better understanding and training, teachers can overcome these barriers and improve English learning outcomes for multilingual students. This emphasizes the importance of continuing professional development for educators. There are some researchers who state that teachers should learn more about different cultures and be able to understand and accept students from those cultures. The culturally responsive teaching (CRT) approach is used when teaching. This method takes into account each student's unique cultural identity and learning needs (Kong et al., 2022; Liao & Li, 2023). Its goal is to lower the difficulties that cultural differences cause and help students from ethnic minorities learn English better (Hue & Kennedy, 2015).

Home surrounding

Parents' active participation has a big effect on how well minority students learn English at the microsystem level (Socorro, 2017). Research by Kalaycı and Öz (2018) highlights the need for parents to foster a home environment which is benefit to their children' development of English language proficiency. For students from ethnic minority groups, their home environments may be different in some ways. For

instance, some families speak more than one language at the same time, which can make it hard for a child to learn a language. However, if parents can actively participate in their children's English learning, through clear language planning and guidance, they can help children better master English. But some studies show that parents may have trouble and be limited in how much they can help their kids learn English (Ke, 2023; Wilder, 2014). Because of their own educational background or financial situation, parents may sometimes have problems that make it harder for them to help their child develop language skills. This could mean that different people have different chances to improve their English skills (Ke, 2023). Furthermore, parental participation may have different effects on how well a student learns a language, based on cultural norms and expectations (Istighfaroh et al., 2023).

The analysis underscored the significance of microsystem elements, particularly the immediate settings of students such as classrooms and homes. These environments were notably emphasized in the research. Future studies and educational strategies should enhance dialogue and teamwork between students, their families, and educational institutions. Such collaborative approaches have been shown to beneficially influence English language competency development.

Aspects of the mesosystem

The concept of mesosystem includes the relationships among several microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the mesosystem level, examining the cumulative effects and relationships between various environments is emphasized. Our analysis identified 9 studies that highlight online learning in multilingual environments as a significant meso-system level influence, affecting the English language competency of ethnic minority students.

Scholarly interest has surged in exploring how online learning within multilingual contexts affects students' capacity to interact across cultures (Benzehaf, 2023; Muszyńska et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2023). Research suggests that online educational environments positively contribute to the development of intercultural language skills. Benzehaf (2023) suggests that this benefit may be a result of the numerous encounters that students have with their peers from all over the world, which helps them improve their abilities to engage in intercultural correspondence. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the possible influence that group projects, the availability of resources, and the assistance of teachers could have on improving online learning experiences and self-evaluation among students from minority groups who are enrolled in high school. According to Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2018), the study also looks at barriers including a lack of social connection and a lack of cultural inclusion in the courses. Furthermore, research on how to design online learning with cultural sensitivity shows that successful pedagogical strategies may be used in culturally diverse online environments. This is critical for minority students in multilingual online learning environments (Janakiraman et al., 2019). However, the shift to online learning in 2020 has exposed potential differences. The data presented by Smith and Reeve (2020) suggest that these imbalances are likely to worsen if appropriate interventions are not taken. Furthermore, they promoted educational programs that prioritized racial equality. Distance learning presents special challenges for students who are suffering language isolation and may need extra language assistance. It has been recognized that this fact underscores the need to customize online learning approaches for minority students (Besser et al, 2022). Some authorities advocate for a focus on cultural adaptability in online education to ensure that cultural variances do not hinder the learning process (Costa, 2021).

The learning environment for ethnic minority students is far more complex than that of Han Chinese students, with various languages and cultures interacting and colliding. Positive learning outcomes can be achieved by minority students by using social media and online communities to expand their perspectives, learn about different languages and cultures, and use English as a communication medium. To recognize the multicultural identity of ethnic minorities, it is advised that educators see online English settings as beneficial venues for authentic input and outflow of English.

Aspects of the exosystem

External systems include external factors that indirectly affect personal growth. Research has shown that the English ability of learners from ethnic minority backgrounds is greatly influenced by their

socioeconomic status and mass media. An exo-system includes the external factors that indirectly impact an individual's development. Through the study, it was found that socioeconomic status and mass media significantly impacted the English language competency of ethnic minority learners.

Vonkova et al. (2024) identified that socioeconomic status (SES) exerts a direct influence on the accessibility of educational resources. A child from a higher-income family is likely to have access to better educational tools, such as English tutoring and chances to study abroad. More school costs may be hard for low-income ethnic group families to pay for. Secondly, minority learners may encounter more challenges in the process of integrating into the mainstream culture. Learners with poor socioeconomic status may find it difficult to obtain adequate acculturation support due to limited resources, such as opportunities for cross-cultural communication and channels to understand mainstream culture. All these will affect their motivation and effect of English learning found that socioeconomic status (SES) has a twofold effect on students' English language achievement. While SES directly contributes to positive outcomes, it also indirectly leads to negative effects by influencing students' self-concept and anxiety levels. Having access to a diverse array of educational resources can greatly benefit students from more privileged backgrounds. These resources include high-quality instructional materials, language-enhancing technology, and extracurricular activities that promote language development. In addition, families with better socioeconomic status tend to have higher expectations and investment in their children's education, and this positive attitude will motivate their children to work harder to learn English. Families with poor economic conditions may have relatively low educational expectations for their children due to life pressure and other reasons, which will also affect their children's motivation to learn (Bushnell, 2021; Butler & Le, Calvo & Bialystok, 2014; Pace et al., 2017).

There are studies highlighting the potential to address the consequences of socio-economic disparities. Positive teacher-student interaction and effective teaching strategies greatly contribute to language proficiency development regardless of socioeconomic status (Pace et al., 2017).

Therefore, socioeconomic variables influence students' language competency in English language acquisition, particularly in places populated by ethnic minorities that have low levels of economic development and limited educational resources. In ethnic minority communities where economic development is comparatively lagging, future studies should examine ways to practically and pedagogically assist students with limited financial means to improve their language ability.

As a result of the growth of the digital revolution, language learning has undergone unprecedented changes. These changes are not only reflected in the number of educational resources and the ease of access, but they also include the development of innovative teaching methods and the enhancement of learning efficiency (Kukulska-Hulme, 2019; Jiang et al., 2020; Sun and Zhang, 2024; Wang & Kabilan, 2024). Recent years have seen significant improvements in ethnic minority education. Online courses, electronic publications, language learning applications, and other outlets give ethnic minority learners access to a multitude of English learning resources. This is because digital technology has eliminated geographical boundaries. In addition, digital technology facilitates interaction and communication among learners. Online learning platforms, social media and other channels provide learners with opportunities for language practice and cultural exchange with global partners (Huang et al., 2022). This interactive learning model not only helps to improve language skills, but also promotes understanding and respect for different cultures.

However, the impact of the digital divide on students from diverse backgrounds cannot be ignored (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Some ethnic minority areas are geographically remote, have a low level of economic development, and suffer from problems such as inconvenient Internet access and lack of digital equipment. Therefore, when promoting digital education, it is necessary to continue to strengthen the hardware facilities to enhance the digital literacy and skills of teachers, parents and minority students.

Aspects of the macrosystem

As part of the "macro system" of society, values, politics, culture, and local events provide a relevant learning environment. The 27 research examined language policy, sociocultural influences, and identity formation as the key factors impacting ethnic minority students' English competency.

Language policies

An important research topic in developing the English language competence of multilingual students is the complex interaction between language policy and the educational experiences of these students. Language policy greatly affects the language development of ethnic minority students, their access to education, cultural connection and social integration (Henderson, 2017; Kelly, 2018; Salami, 2016; Sánchez et al., 2018; Zhang & Shi, 2023).

The policy has enhanced the English language proficiency of ethnic minority students in various respects (Henderson, 2017). Particular policy initiatives aim to enhance the inclusion of students from ethnic minority backgrounds in English as a Foreign Language environments. This encompasses the provision of supplementary support and resources to tackle any scholarly challenges they might encounter. Policy adjustments are crucial to closing the English learning gap between different groups and promoting educational equity. According to Salami (2016), bilingual educational practices have the potential to empower students from minority backgrounds. This empowerment is achieved through the development of bilingualism, enabling these students to participate in school life and preserve their mother tongue and cultural heritage (Salami, 2016). But some people say that language policies, even if they are meant to be helpful, might make educational inequality worse without meaning to. Han et al.'s (2016) study says that popular languages often affect how well students learn standard languages, which can be bad for minority students whose language backgrounds are different from this standard. This will result in an unequal allocation of educational resources, perpetuating the wealth disparity. As a result, there will be an imbalance in the allocation of educational resources, which will increase the socioeconomic gap. The socioeconomic gap will be maintained as a result of the unequal distribution of educational resources.

Also, problems with putting policies into action have been a main topic of discussion. The researchers say there is a big difference between what officials say they want to do and what they actually do. A study by Guo and Gu (2016) found that Uighur primary school students in Xinjiang have had a lot of problems learning English, such as not getting enough help in school, being treated unfairly, being socially isolated, and having trouble with money. These issues demonstrate that implementing policies may be challenging, which may increase the pressure on children to perform well academically.

The discussion around language regulations extends beyond classroom boundaries to encompass broader cultural issues (Altarriba & Basnight-Brown, 2022; Cushing et al., 2024). Yang et al. (2015) show that Chinese students from ethnic minorities do not do as well in school as Han students. They say this difference is because of language barriers and differences in the quality of teachers. They underscore the importance of comprehensive policies to address the obstacles that ethnic minority students face in overcoming sociocultural barriers and acquiring a second or third language. Besides, Hossain (2016) states that language and culture are interconnected, underlining the need for culturally diverse pedagogy. Therefore, language policy formulation and implementation greatly impact ethnic minority students' English learning experiences.

Sociocultural factors and identity construction

The study of sociocultural elements and identity creation has been a focal point in understanding the English language competency of ethnic minority students. This topic has been extensively explored by researchers such as Gu and Benson (2015), Baker (2016), Borrero and Yeh (2020), and Pham and Kim (2022).

A vital viewpoint highlights the importance of cultural identity in motivation and success in language acquisition. Cummins et al. (2015) report that a significant perspective emphasizes the significance of cultural identity in motivating language learning. This approach highlights the strong connection between the identity of minority students and their cultural background and language. This perspective also shows the strong relationship that exists between the identity of students who are members of ethnic minority groups and their cultural background when it comes to language. One of the most important aspects in developing a sense of community among students is the connection that exists between their cultural identities and their level of skill in the English language, as stated by Halle et al. (2014).

According to Gu and Benson (2015), it is possible to significantly boost the level of motivation that students have, as well as to enhance their overall experience of learning a language.

Second, cultural capital is an important determinant of language learning outcomes (Hauzel et al., 2022; Su & Ma, 2021). Hauzel et al. (2022) argue that people with a solid foundation in their native language and cultural background have an advantage in learning a new language. According to Liu and Edwards (2017), as a result of their ability to transfer abilities and develop links between different languages, they are able to reap this benefit. However, persons who have challenges with proficiency in their original language may require support in order to acquire English language skills (Nguyen et al., 2023; Wu, 2016; Yang & Gao, 2015).

In addition, many scholars have emphasized the importance of using culture-relevant teaching practices (Kong et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Peng et al., 2023). Xu (2024) emphasizes that students' sociocultural and educational backgrounds have an important impact on their attitudes, motivation and language choice, and that educators need to adopt cultural-adaptive teaching to promote students' learning.

In summary, research conducted in this particular area of study provides insights into the intricate dynamics of language policy, sociocultural influences, identity perceptions, and English language proficiency of multilingual students. Therefore, it is recommended that educators place the English competency development of ethnic minority students within a broader environmental framework. This approach is taken to promote equity and inclusion of students of different ethnic groups in the educational environment.

Aspects of the chronosystem

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework includes the chronosystem, which encompasses the influence of temporal dynamics on an individual's growth within the interplay of environmental systems. For ethnic minority groups, life changes such as cultural adaptation, as well as pivotal historical occurrences, serve as chronosystemic influences on the development of English language skills. The journey from speaking only one language to engaging in a multilingual environment can profoundly shape language proficiency. Recent advancements in the study of second and third language acquisition, particularly theories surrounding linguistic transfer, have broadened the research horizon in this field. Our analysis aligns with these findings, pinpointing the experience of multilingualism as a chronological influence on the English language abilities of ethnic minority learners.

Min's (2023) research indicated that cultural adaptation enhances language skills, particularly when driven by the learner's motivation. The study by Lopez and Bui (2014) suggested that modes of cultural integration, along with the frequency and quality of interactions with the dominant culture, correlate with self-esteem levels. Moreover, extended periods of cultural immersion tend to boost confidence. Siebold's (2024) theoretical framework emphasized the importance of narrative ownership and introduces 'acculturative joy' as a new perspective for research. However, these academic areas still struggle to establish a foothold in the politically charged atmosphere of minority discourse. The comprehensive analysis by Huang and Chalmers (2023) evaluated the impact of using multiple languages in EFL education, indicating that such methods can enhance learning under certain conditions. Rojas (2022) challenged the single-language paradigm, advocating for acknowledgment of the intricate multilingual landscape in language instruction. Conteh and Meier (2014) highlighted the importance of native language preservation and the acquisition of additional languages, suggesting the term 'emergent bilinguals' for students developing language proficiency. Gunnarsson et al. (2015) found that individuals raised in a monolingual environment tend to think in their second language, English, more during the writing process compared to those with a bilingual upbringing, who are becoming trilingual.

In a multilingual society, the competency of learners in the English language is shaped by numerous factors, such as their individual backgrounds, the extent of available support, and the distinct attributes of the multilingual context to which they are adapting. Educators and policymakers need to be aware of these potential implications in order to provide appropriate support to learners who are going through this transition.

Ethnic distribution of subjects

The ethnic distribution of the sample underscores the importance of giving more weight to specific ethnic groups in research. It is typical for many studies on foreign language education for ethnic minorities to include multiple ethnic groups, as can be seen from the high proportion (80%) of these 82 studies using this approach. This result is consistent with the study by Cheng et al. (2021). The proportion of ethnic mixed sampling methods in 32 studies was as high as 60% (Cheng et al., 2021). On the other hand, focused studies on individual minority groups are less common, accounting for about 10 percent of studies. Many of these surveys do not take into account the unique attributes that distinguish one ethnic group from another. In addition, Uighurs in Xinjiang, Mongolians in Inner Mongolia, and Tibetans in Tibet have been the main focus of minority-focused English education research in China. Although the Zhuang are the most populous ethnic group in China, and the Miao, Tujia, Buyi, Dong, Yao, and other ethnic groups are also numerous, their status in academic research is not prominent.

Some researchers found that among the 93 literatures reviewed, Tibetans, Uyghur, Yi and Mongolian received relatively high attention in a single study, while the other nine ethnic minorities received less than three studies (Shao et al., 2019).

Uighurs, Tibetans, and Mongolians have drawn scholars' interest due to their sociopolitical implications. Language education is crucial to the government's goal of stability and unity in Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang (Feng, 2012; Zhang & Adamson, 2023). The strategic position of these regions in China's national development plans and their geopolitical significance have prompted these groups to receive research funding and attention. As a result, many studies have been carried out in these areas on the English education of the respective ethnic groups (Cheng et al., 2019). On the other hand, although the Zhuang, Miao, Tujia, Buyi, Dong, Yao, etc. are the most numerous ethnic groups in China, they receive much less attention in the literature. Because these minorities all live in remote, hilly areas, researchers may find it more challenging to reach these minorities. Scholarly interest and research funding are frequently focused on areas where national development objectives are more prevalent and in line with China's larger socioeconomic aims (Smith & Clarke, 2016). This has led to a lack of attention for the Zhuang, Miao, Tujia, Buyi, Dong, Yao, and other inhabited areas, which has made their marginalization in the literature even worse.

Future directions

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, individual development is closely related to the environment (Tong & An, 2023). Students in ethnic minority areas live in an environment with distinct ethnic characteristics for a long time. This unique cultural background not only shapes their personality, but also profoundly influences their learning motivation and self-efficacy. Therefore, an in-depth study of the impact of multiculturalism and diversity of educational backgrounds on students' language learning experience is crucial for future research. In addition, further research is needed in the ecological environment the interaction mechanism of micro system, intermediate system, outer system, macro system and time system helps us to understand the complexity of language learning more comprehensively.

Studies have examined the effects of digital learning technologies. However, more research is needed to determine how students can use these technologies for education. In their study, Otto et al. (2023) stressed that students' interactions with digital learning tools are more than technical. Students' ability to learn independently and use digital tools are both critical. Therefore, further research could explore the intricate dynamic relationship between students and digital learning tools to improve student learning outcomes.

In terms of educators and teaching strategies, there is a growing body of research on the training needs of educators. However, there is still a need for further research on the design and implementation strategies of specific training programs. Gu (2018) highlighted in her research the importance of exploring in depth the specific challenges educators face in real-world situations and coping strategies. To find approaches to help educators increase multicultural education in a range of settings, further research is consequently required.

The importance of parental involvement in facilitating language acquisition for students from multilingual backgrounds has been recognized as a key factor (Housel, 2020). Future research should focus on figuring out the challenges and obstacles parents face when trying to get involved in their kids' English learning. This will help shed light on what makes it tough for parents, teachers, and students to work together effectively.

One area that has been overlooked in academic research is the influence of socioeconomic factors on the language competency of ethnic minority students. More research is necessary to explore the impact of socioeconomic status (SES) on ethnic minority students (Basit et al., 2015). Various socioeconomic circumstances can significantly impact individuals' language development and academic achievement, including familial income, educational attainment, and resource accessibility. When conducting research, it is essential to consider how these factors interact with language policy and cultural identity, as they can impact students' language competency.

When implementing educational policies, more research is needed to improve the effectiveness of these policies in practical situations. As mentioned earlier, there are clear differences in policy implementation, especially in areas with minority populations (Wu, 2018). Learners who learn English as a foreign language may encounter obstacles in improving their foreign language skills in a particular social, cultural, or religious environment. Future studies should focus on enhancing the efficiency of educational policy implementation to help minority children in those places become more proficient in English.

Researchers usually use mixed ethnic minority sampling methods in their studies. However, studies that sample a single ethnic group tend to cover only certain ethnic groups, and comparative studies are rare. Given the urgent need for research on ethnic minorities and their English education - both in China and in other culturally diverse and ethnically complex countries - the quantity and quality of current research does not meet the actual needs. Therefore, the future research should expand the sample, include the English education of various ethnic groups into the research scope, and explore its unique educational characteristics. At the same time, it is necessary to carry out a wider range of diverse and cross-cultural comparative studies. These studies should involve different ethnic groups in the same region, as well as the same ethnic group in different regions, in order to discover the uniqueness and differences in English education among ethnic groups with the same spatio-temporal background.

In conclusion, the existing literature on the English language proficiency of minority students makes a significant contribution to illuminating several aspects of language acquisition encounters. However, it is necessary to examine the many aspects that affect bilingual and multilingual students' English language ability in the context of society as a whole to help us gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that ethnic minority students face in the language learning process.

Conclusions

This study has integrated research trends and highlighted the key factors influencing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning among ethnic minority students through an ecological lens. This review of 82 studies revealed that the development of English language competency in ethnic minority students is influenced by a wide range of factors across different systemic levels—individual, micro, meso, exo, and macro systems. This review highlights the importance of understanding these influences in a thorough manner by employing an ecological framework to clarify how these factors interact to affect language learning behaviors. Using ecological approach, learners' interaction with different environments can be viewed more comprehensively, and the complex influence of family environment, socio-economic conditions, language policy and sociocultural factors on learners' language ability development can be revealed. Regionally, foreign language education for ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Yunnan has attracted more attention. Besides, the selection of participants tends to favor a mix of different ethnic groups, ignoring the different characteristics of each ethnic minority group.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the value of using an ecological framework to explore the multifaceted factors that influence the English language competency of ethnic minority students. It highlights the need for more comprehensive research on the language learning of marginalised ethnic minority groups, which not only helps to improve their English language competency and better integrate them into global competition, but also enhances their cultural identity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

About the authors

Panzhen Zhao is a PhD candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction program at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. She also holds a position as a lecturer in a college in China, where she is dedicated to enhancing her teaching skills and showcases a profound interest in Curriculum and Instruction. Supported by university research grants, she has successfully conducted several research projects related to English curriculum reforms. Her current research focuses on English education in ethnic minority areas, where she aims to make significant progress in understanding and improving the quality of English language teaching and learning. Her research interests include exploring teaching methods and strategies for ethnic minorities, studying language attrition and maintenance, and assessing intercultural communicative competence. Additionally, she is passionate about translating classic works of ethnic minorities in China, aiming to preserve and promote their cultural heritage.



Prof. Aminuddin Hassan is in this photograph. He is a professor at the Department of Foundations of Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia. Aminuddin Hassan is an esteemed researcher focused on the intricacies of English language acquisition among ethnic minority students. He has been involved in research, teaching and consultancy works, in the area of philosophy of education, higher education, thinking skills and logic. This paper is part of a comprehensive project that spans over a decade, delving into the multifaceted factors influencing language proficiency. The research underscores the pivotal role of psychological attributes, familial support, and digital tools in shaping educational outcomes. Aminuddin Hassan's work advocates for a holistic educational framework that integrates personal motivation and cultural identity, aiming to equip students for global engagement. Holding a Doctor of Philosophy from Universiti Putra Malaysia, Aminuddin Hassan and his group continue to pioneer strategies that address the unique challenges of language learning in diverse populations, fostering equitable access to opportunities in the interconnected world.

Nur Aimi Nasuha Burhanuddin holds a Ph.D. and currently serves as a Lecturer at the Department of Foundations of Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, University Putra Malaysia. As an accomplished researcher, Dr. Nur Aimi Nasuha Burhanuddin has published extensively in her field and presented her work at numerous academic conferences. Dr. Nur Aimi Nasuha Burhanuddin's research interests span Educational psychology, coaching and mentoring, and positive psychology. As an educator, Dr. Nur Aimi Nasuha Burhanuddin is passionate about fostering a supportive and nurturing learning environment. Her work in Educational Psychology explores the intricacies of learning and teaching processes, while their research in Coaching and Mentoring focuses on developing strategies to enhance individual growth. Additionally, Dr. Nur Aimi Nasuha Burhanuddin is actively dedicated in studying Positive Psychology, studying human strengths and virtues to promote well-being and resilience.

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