JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Digital Platforms and English Language Proficiency among Undergraduate Students in the Coastal Communities of Central Kerala

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Abstract

Digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram now serve many young Indians as everyday places to meet English outside the classroom. Whether students from the coastal fishing communities of Thrissur District, central Kerala, can use them to build English proficiency depends on schooling, household resources and digital access. This paper examines those conditions through published secondary data. Primary data on students' own platform use and proficiency are yet to be collected.

The study is a descriptive analysis of five sources: the Marine Fisheries Census 2016 for Kerala, the National Statistical Office's 75th round survey, the ASER 2023 and 2024 reports, and two published studies of Kerala's fisherfolk. Indicators for Thrissur and Kerala were computed from the census tables. The method reproduces the census report's own summary figures.

Thrissur's coast has 4,622 fisher families and 20,961 fisherfolk, 3.7 per cent of Kerala's marine fisherfolk. About 89.7 per cent of those above five years of age are formally educated, against 84.7 per cent for Kerala. That is the second highest share among the nine coastal districts. Degree-level schooling is thinner (2.6 per cent against 3.4 per cent). Women hold 68.6 per cent of the qualifications at graduation level or above, the highest share in the state. Poverty is high: 66.5 per cent of families are below the poverty line, against 59.6 per cent. Phone use is wide (55.5 per cent of families, against 43.8 per cent), all 18 fishing villages have mobile coverage, and four colleges stand within them. Nationally, a little over half of rural youth (57.3 per cent) can read simple English sentences, and Kerala's young people are heavy social media users. No published source measures English proficiency or platform use among undergraduates from these communities. The paper sets out that gap and what a primary study must measure.

Keywords: Digital platforms; social media; English language proficiency; secondary data; coastal fishing communities; undergraduate students; Thrissur; Kerala.

1. Introduction

English is no longer learned only in the classroom. Short videos, captions, comment threads, voice notes and group chats bring learners into daily contact with the language, and researchers now treat this informal digital activity as a serious site of language learning.[1] For learners who hear little English at home or in the neighbourhood, these platforms may matter more than they do for students from English-rich backgrounds. They cost little, are open at any hour, and need no formal enrolment.

Kerala offers a distinctive setting for the question. The state has long had one of the highest literacy rates in India, and its colleges teach many subjects through English.[2] Yet Malayalam remains the language of home, street and market. The gap between schooling in English and everyday English use is wide for many

[1]Reinhardt, J. (2019). Social media in second and foreign language teaching and learning: Blogs, wikis, and social networking. *Language Teaching, 52*(1), 1–39.

[2]Press Trust of India. (2020, September 7). At 96.2 pc, Ker tops literacy rate chart; AP worst performer at 66.4 [report on the National Statistical Office's 75th round survey, July 2017–June 2018]. Udayavani.

students. In the coastal belt of Thrissur District, where fishing has been the traditional occupation of many families, the gap is often sharper. Students there are frequently the first generation to attend college, and they may have fewer chances to hear, speak and write English outside class.

The question is also one of identity. Learners decide whether to speak, post or stay silent according to who they think they are, whom they wish to become and which communities they hope to join.[3] Online spaces can offer new communities of practice and imagined futures,[4] and they can also bring comparison, anxiety and the fear of being judged for a Malayalam-influenced accent.

Existing research gives useful leads but says little about this community. Reviews of social media in language learning point to gains in vocabulary, writing and motivation, while stressing that results depend on how learners use the platforms.[5] Studies of online informal learning show that learners acquire English through media they choose themselves.[6] Most such work deals with urban university students or international contexts. Evidence on an occupational community of coastal Kerala is scarce.

This paper approaches the gap from the side of context. Primary data on how undergraduates from these communities use digital platforms, and how well they use English, are yet to be collected. The paper therefore asks what published secondary data can already say about the conditions that shape both. Sections 2 to 5 review the literature and set out the objectives, scope and method. Section 6 analyses the data, and Sections 7 to 10 discuss, qualify and conclude.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Input, output and learning online

Krashen's Input Hypothesis holds that learners acquire a language when they understand input slightly beyond their present level.[7] Swain's Output Hypothesis adds that producing language, by speaking or writing, makes learners notice gaps in what they know and refine it.[8] Social media can supply both. A learner who watches an explainer video receives input; one who writes a reply to it, or sends a voice note to a friend, produces output and may receive feedback. Sociocultural views extend the point: learning happens through participation in communities of practice, where newcomers move from the edge towards fuller membership.[9]

2.2 Social media and English language learning

Reinhardt's survey of social media in second and foreign language teaching and learning finds evidence of benefit for vocabulary, writing and interaction, but notes that outcomes depend on task design and learner agency.[10] Thorne, Black and Sykes show that internet interest communities and online games offer real settings for second language use and socialisation.[11] Lamy and Zourou's collection of studies of social networking in language education reports both promise and uneven practice.[12] Sockett documents how learners acquire English informally through television series, music and online media they choose for themselves,[13] and Benson places such activity within a wider field of learning beyond the classroom.[14] These studies suggest that platforms can provide input, practice and motivation. They also warn of risks: distraction, exposure to non-standard or inaccurate models, and the possibility that learners who already have some proficiency benefit most. Whether this holds for students with limited prior exposure to English is an open empirical question.

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[3]Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 35*, 36–56.

[4]Thorne, S. L., Black, R. W., & Sykes, J. M. (2009). Second language use, socialization, and learning in Internet interest communities and online games. *Modern Language Journal*, *93*(s1), 802–821.

[5]Reinhardt (2019); see note 1.

[6]Sockett, G. (2014). *The online informal learning of English*. Palgrave Macmillan.

[7]Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon.

[8]Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235–253). Newbury House.

[9]Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press; Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.

[10]Reinhardt (2019); see note 1.

[11]Thorne, Black, & Sykes (2009); see note 4.

[12]Lamy, M.-N., & Zourou, K. (Eds.). (2013). *Social networking for language education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

[13]Sockett (2014); see note 6.

[14]Benson, P. (2011). Language learning and teaching beyond the classroom: An introduction to the field. In P. Benson & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Beyond the language classroom* (pp. 7–16). Palgrave Macmillan.

2.3 Identity, investment and unequal repertoires

Norton argues that a learner's willingness to practise a language depends on investment, which is shaped by identity, power relations and the capital the learner hopes to gain.[15] Darvin and Norton extend this into a model linking identity, capital and ideology, with particular attention to digital settings.[16] The model explains why two students with the same devices and data plans may use English very differently. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System similarly ties effort to learners' images of their ideal and obligated future selves.[17] Blommaert shows that language resources are unevenly distributed, and that people from marginal places often hold repertoires valued less in prestigious settings.[18] This matters for coastal learners, whose Malayalam-influenced English may be judged against a standard they have had little chance to practise. Kachru's model of World Englishes supports treating Indian English as a legitimate variety, not as a deficient copy of another.[19]

2.4 Self-presentation and the gap

Boyd describes how young people use networked publics to manage audiences, explore identity and seek belonging.[20] Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe link Facebook use among college students to social capital,[21] which matters for learners who gain contacts and opportunities through online networks. The literature thus gives grounds for expecting that digital platforms matter for English learning. It also leaves four gaps: few studies in coastal occupational communities of Kerala; few designs that link proficiency, platform use and identity; heavy reliance on self-report; and limited attention to learners' own accounts. This paper takes up the first gap by way of context and prepares the ground for the others.

3. Objectives and Research Questions

3.1 Objectives

1. To profile the coastal fisher community of Thrissur District from the Marine Fisheries Census 2016.
2. To assess schooling and higher education in the community, in comparison with Kerala and the other coastal districts.
3. To describe household conditions and the digital infrastructure of its fishing villages.
4. To summarise what national and state data show about English reading and smartphone and social media use among rural youth.
5. To identify what secondary data cannot show about English proficiency and platform use in this community.
6. To specify the measures a primary study must collect.

3.2 Research questions

1. How large and how well schooled is the fisher community of coastal Thrissur, compared with Kerala and the other coastal districts?
2. What household resources and digital infrastructure do its villages have?
3. What do rural-youth data show about English reading and smartphone and social media use?
4. What is missing from the evidence, and what should a primary study measure?

[15]Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters.

[16]Darvin & Norton (2015); see note 3.

[17]Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

[18]Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge University Press.

[19]Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge University Press.

[20]Boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.

[21]Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 12*(4), 1143–1168.

No hypotheses are tested. The data are aggregate and cannot support inference about individual students.

4. Scope of the Study

Dimension	Scope
Place	The coastal belt of Thrissur District in central Kerala: 18 census fishing villages in Chavakkad and Kodungallur taluks (Figure 1). The other eight coastal districts of Kerala and the state total serve as comparators.
Population	The marine fisher community as enumerated by the census, with ASER and NSO data on rural youth as the nearest evidence on students.
Indicators	Population, schooling, higher education, poverty, housing, phone use, village infrastructure, English reading, and smartphone and social media use.
Period	Marine Fisheries Census, February 2016; NSO 75th round, July 2017 to June 2018; ASER 2023 and 2024; earlier studies for 1980–2011.

The study collects no data from individuals and does not measure English proficiency. It aims for a well-grounded account of the conditions in one community that may be transferable to similar coastal and occupational settings, and it does not claim to represent all Kerala students.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Design

The study is a descriptive secondary-data analysis. It uses published tables and reports only. Indicators are computed from the district-wise census tables and compared across the nine coastal districts and with the state total.

5.2 Sources

Table 1: Secondary sources used[22]

Source	Coverage	Used for
Marine Fisheries Census 2016, Kerala	Nine coastal districts; 220 fishing villages; district and village tables	Population, schooling, poverty, housing, phones, infrastructure
NSO 75th round (2017–18), as reported by PTI	All states; literacy at 7+; computer and internet use at 15–29	State literacy; digital skills
ASER 2023 and 2024	Rural youth aged 14–18 (34,745; 28 districts); ASER 2024: 605 districts, ages 14–16	English reading; smartphone access and use
Ancy & Raju (2014); Shyam et al. (2017)	Kerala fisherfolk, 1980–2010; 567 fisher households, 2011	Trend in schooling; household profile

5.3 Indicators and checks

Five indicators are computed from the census district tables. The **formally educated share** is the number with primary schooling or above (Table 4) divided by the population above five years of age (Table 3). The **degree-level share** uses the same base for those with graduation or above. The **women's share of degree-level** is women as a proportion of all with graduation or above. The **poverty share** is families below the poverty line as a proportion of fisher families (Table 1). The **phone share** is families with a mobile phone used during fishing as a proportion of fisher families (Table 11).

The method reproduces the census report's own summary figures: nearly 85 per cent formally educated in Kerala, 94 per cent in Kollam and 74 per cent in Thiruvananthapuram, 44 per cent of families with mobile phones, and 60 per cent below the poverty line. The report's 36 per cent with primary education only differs by about half a point from the 35.4 per cent computed here.

[22]Each source is cited in full where it is first used in Section 6 and in the bibliography.

5.4 Ethics and the primary phase

All sources are published and aggregate, and no human participants are involved. Primary data collection is the next phase and is not reported here. The planned instrument is described in one line:

- **Questionnaire:** about 20 five-point Likert items in six sections, with a Malayalam version, for the later primary phase.

6. Analysis of Secondary Data

6.1 The study area and its fisher community

Thrissur's marine coast has 18 fishing villages in two taluks, Chavakkad and Kodungallur, and 23 landing centres. The census recorded 4,622 fisher families, of which 4,231 are traditional fishing families, and a fisherfolk population of 20,961 (Figure 1).[23] That is 3.7 per cent of Kerala's 563,903 marine fisherfolk, and only Kannur (20,195) has a smaller population (Figure 2a). The two taluks are of almost equal size: Chavakkad has 10,416 fisherfolk in ten villages and Kodungallur 10,545 in eight. There are 257 families per fishing village, against 553 for the state, an average family size of five, and 947 women for every 1,000 men. A community this small is unlikely to yield enough respondents in a state-level survey to be analysed on its own, which is one reason it has seldom been studied.

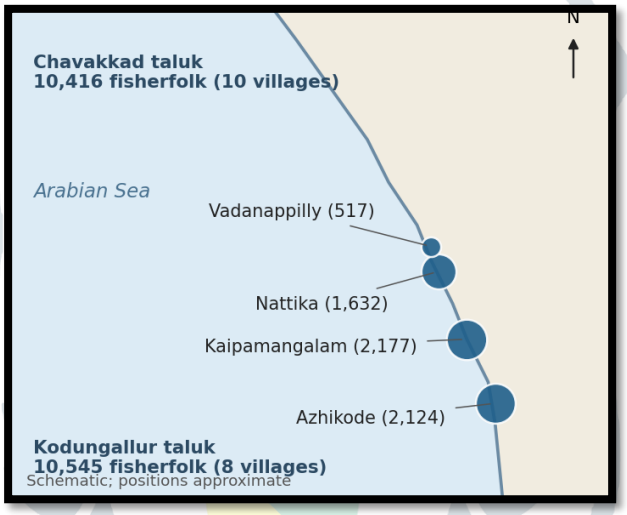

Figure 1. The fisher community of coastal Thrissur: census 2016 fisherfolk population in selected villages and taluks (schematic map; positions approximate).

[23]Department of Fisheries & ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute. (2020). *Marine fisheries census 2016: Kerala*. CMFRI, Kochi. Table 1 (district profile) and Table 3 (population structure). The census was conducted in February 2016 in nine coastal districts.

6.2 Schooling and higher education

Schooling is the community's strong point. Taking persons above five years as the eligible group, 89.7 per cent of Thrissur's fisherfolk are formally educated, against 84.7 per cent for Kerala. Only Kollam (94.1 per cent) is higher (Figure 2b).[24] Higher secondary schooling is especially common, at 43.9 per cent of the eligible population against 37.8 per cent for the state (Table 2). Degree-level schooling is thinner. Graduation or above is held by 2.6 per cent in Thrissur and 3.4 per cent in Kerala.

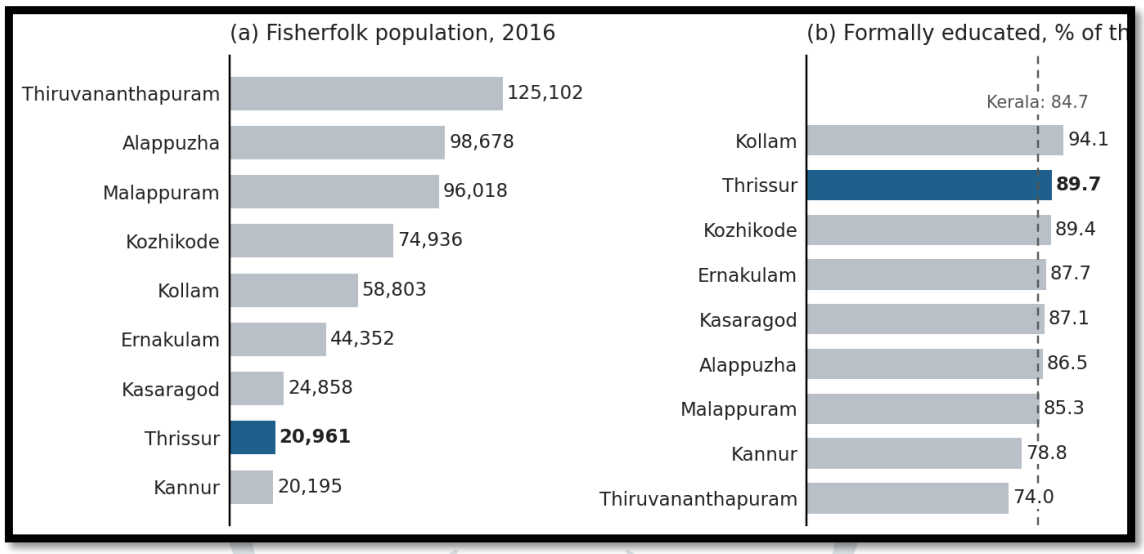

Figure 2. (a) Fisherfolk population and (b) formally educated share of the population above five years, by coastal district (Marine Fisheries Census 2016; shares computed by the author; Thrissur highlighted).

Women lead at the top of the education ladder. Of the 513 people in Thrissur with graduation or above, 352 are women. That is 68.6 per cent, the highest share of the nine districts, against 57.7 per cent for Kerala (Figure 3). Earlier data show how recent this schooling is. The share of Kerala's fisherfolk with no schooling fell from 77 per cent in 1980 to 27 per cent in 2005, and was still 27 per cent in 2010. Those with higher secondary schooling or above rose from 5 per cent to 44 per cent and then eased to 40 per cent (Figure 4).[25] Bases and definitions differ from the 2016 census, so the comparison is indicative only. It does suggest that first-generation college students from these communities are the product of a recent and still incomplete expansion.

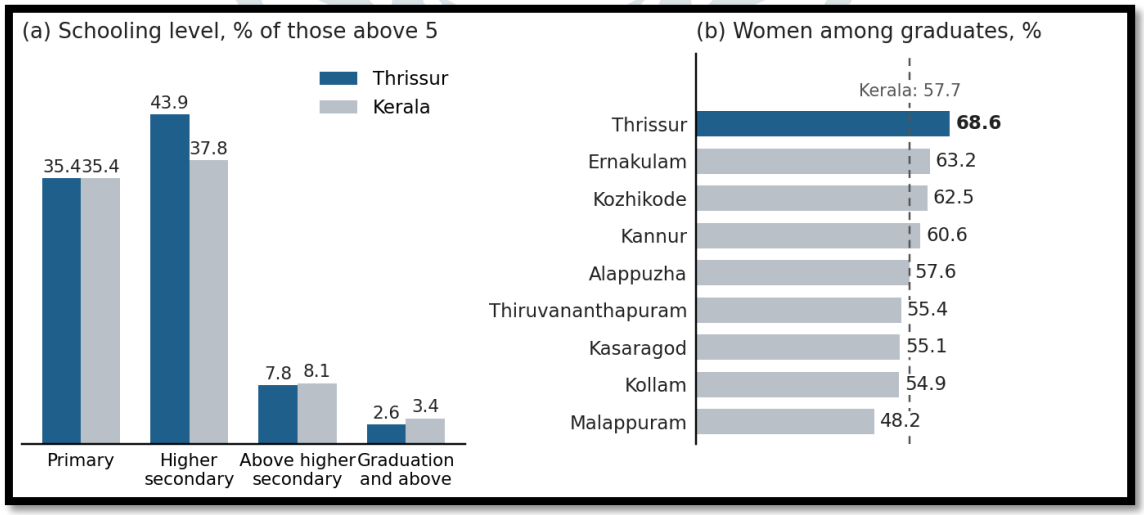

Figure 3. (a) Schooling level in Thrissur and Kerala, as a share of the population above five years, and (b) women's share of those with graduation or above, by district (Marine Fisheries Census 2016; computed by the author).

[24]Marine Fisheries Census 2016, Tables 3 and 4; see note 23. Shares are computed by the author (Section 5.3).

[25]Ancy, V. P., & Raju, K. V. (2014) . Structural changes in the fisheries sector of Kerala: An overview. *IOSR Journal of Economics and Finance, 5*(6, Ver. III), 14–18. The tables reproduce Marine Fisheries Census data of the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute. The source line of the table cites the 2005 census and the text cites 2010, so the year should be confirmed against the original census report.

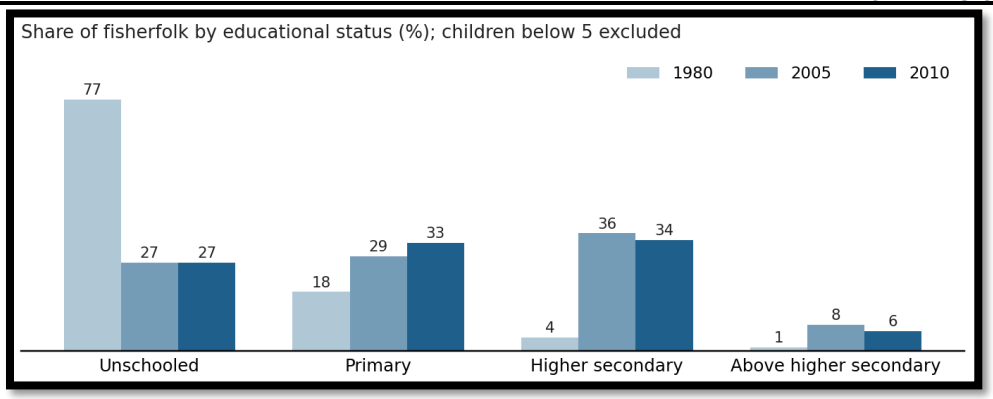

Figure 4. Educational status of Kerala fisherfolk -1980, 2005 and 2010 (Ancy & Raju, 2014).

6.3 Household conditions and digital infrastructure

The community is poor but not cut off. Families below the poverty line number 3,073, or 66.5 per cent, against 59.6 per cent for Kerala. Only Thiruvananthapuram (68.2 per cent) is higher.[26] Almost all houses are electrified (99.2 per cent), and 67.4 per cent use tap water as the main source, but 18.7 per cent are kutcha houses, against 11.2 per cent for the state.[27] A study of 567 fisher households across Kerala, with data collected in 2011, found that most fisherfolk were aged 36 to 55, belonged to small families and had a high literacy rate. Many households, however, were heavily indebted.[28] Indebtedness may limit what families can spend on coaching, devices and data.

Digital infrastructure is in place. All 18 fishing villages have mobile phone coverage, and 55.5 per cent of fisher families (2,565) report a mobile phone used during fishing. That is the second highest share in the state after Malappuram (73.5 per cent) and above the Kerala figure of 43.8 per cent.[29] The item counts phones used at sea, so it is not a measure of household or student ownership. Educational infrastructure is also close at hand: the 18 villages contain 36 primary schools, 46 secondary schools, 4 colleges and 6 technical institutions (Kerala: 458, 260, 39 and 29).[30]

Table 2: Thrissur's fisher community compared with Kerala (Marine Fisheries Census 2016; shares computed by the author)

Indicator	**Thrissur**	**Kerala**
Fisher families; fisherfolk population	4,622; 20,961	121,637; 563,903
Families per fishing village	257	553
Formally educated, % of those above five years	89.7	84.7
Higher secondary schooling, %	43.9	37.8
Graduation and above, %	2.6	3.4
Women among those with graduation and above, %	68.6	57.7
Families below the poverty line, %	66.5	59.6
Families with a mobile phone used during fishing, %	55.5	43.8
Houses electrified, %; houses with tap water, %	99.2; 67.4	98.5; 59.4
Colleges; technical institutions in fishing villages	4; 6	39; 29

[26]Marine Fisheries Census 2016, Table 1; see note 23.

[27]Marine Fisheries Census 2016, Table 2 (housing, scale and amenities); see note 23.

[28]Shyam, S. S., Narayanakumar, R., Sathiadhas, R., Manjusha, U., & Antony, B. (2017). Appraisal of the socio-economic status of fishers among the different sectors in Kerala, south-west coast of India. *Indian Journal of Fisheries*, *64*(1), 66–71.

[29]Marine Fisheries Census 2016, Table 11 (life saving and electronic equipment) and Table 15 (amenities and facilities); see note 23. The mobile phone item counts families with a phone used during fishing.

[30]Marine Fisheries Census 2016, Table 16 (infrastructure profile); see note 23. The counts refer to institutions located in the marine fishing villages.

6.4 English reading and digital access among rural youth

No published survey measures the English proficiency of students from fishing communities. The nearest evidence comes from ASER, which surveys rural youth (Table 3). National survey data from 2017–18 add that Kerala's literacy among persons aged seven and above is 96.2 per cent, against 77.7 per cent for India, a gap of 18.5 points. About 24 per cent of rural and 56 per cent of urban persons aged 15 to 29 could operate a computer, and about 35 per cent of persons in this age group had used the internet in the previous 30 days.[31] These figures are for India as a whole and predate the rapid growth of mobile data use, so they show a rural–urban divide in digital skills but not the present level of use in coastal Thrissur.

Table 3: English reading and smartphone access among rural youth[32]

Indicator	Figure	Base	Source
Can read English sentences	57.3%; of these, 73.5% can tell the meaning	Rural youth aged 14–18, India	ASER 2023
Can use a smartphone	92% (self-reported); close to 90% have one in the household	Rural youth aged 14–18, India	ASER 2023
Own a smartphone	43.7% of males and 19.8% of females	Those who can use a smartphone	ASER 2023
Used a smartphone for an educational activity in the past week	57%	Those aged 14–16 who can use one	ASER 2024
Used a smartphone for social media in the past week	76% (boys 78.8%, girls 73.4%)	Those aged 14–16 who can use one	ASER 2024
Kerala: educational use and social media use	Over 80% and over 90% respectively	Children aged 14–16 in Kerala	ASER 2024

Two points stand out. Smartphone access is nearly universal, and Kerala is high even by that standard, especially for social media. Basic English reading, by contrast, is far from universal: a little over half of rural youth could read simple English sentences. Ownership is uneven, with males more than twice as likely as females to have their own smartphone.

6.5 What the secondary data show and do not show

The data describe a community with a strong schooling base, modest household resources and working digital infrastructure. Thrissur's fisher community is small. Its formal schooling is among the highest on the coast, but its degree-level schooling is thinner than the state's, and women hold most of the degree-level qualifications. Phone use is wide, and Kerala's young people use social media heavily. Nationally, basic English reading among rural youth is modest.

Important questions remain open. The data do not show the measured English proficiency of undergraduates from fishing communities, since ASER's English measure is a basic reading task. Nor do they show which platforms students use for English, how often, and for what, because ASER reports general smartphone and social media use. Nothing in them is specific to undergraduates, as ASER covers ages 14–18 and the census covers whole populations. And they cannot give present-day conditions in coastal Thrissur, since ASER's Kerala figures are given only as thresholds. This gap is what a primary study must fill.

7. Discussion

Read against the framework in Section 2, the data suggest three things. First, access is unlikely to be the main barrier. Mobile coverage reaches all 18 villages, phone use among fisher families is above the state level, and smartphone use is close to universal among rural youth. If so, differences in English proficiency will turn on how platforms are used, not on whether students can reach them.

[31] Press Trust of India (2020); see note 2. The figures on computer and internet use refer to persons aged 15–29.

[32] ASER Centre. (2024). *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023: Beyond Basics. Main findings* (34,745 rural youth aged 14–18; 28 districts in 26 states). ASER Centre. (2025). *Annual Status of Education Report 2024: National findings* (605 rural districts; digital literacy section, ages 14–16). Pratham, New Delhi.

Second, the schooling base is strong but thin at the top. Formal schooling of 89.7 per cent gives English something to build on. Yet the degree-level share is below the state's, and basic English reading is far from universal among rural youth nationally. Investment in English, in Norton's sense, may depend on what capital students from these communities expect it to bring.

Third, gender cuts both ways. Women hold 68.6 per cent of degree-level qualifications in the community, yet nationally males are more than twice as likely as females to own a smartphone (43.7 and 19.8 per cent). If the same pattern holds on this coast, the students best placed to use English in college may be those with the least private access to the platforms where it is practised. This is a question for the primary phase, not a finding. None of these readings can be tested with the present data.

8. Implications

For the primary study, the data point to what must be measured: English proficiency, with a CEFR-aligned test; which platforms students use and for what; smartphone ownership by gender; and students' sense of themselves as English users. The census villages of Chavakkad and Kodungallur taluks provide a sampling frame. For colleges and policymakers, the evidence suggests that support for English in these communities need not wait on connectivity. It may need to attend to degree-level progression and to the gender gap in private smartphone access.

9. Limitations

- The data are aggregate and cannot show how individual students use platforms or how well they use English.
- The sources differ in year, base and definition: the census is from 2016, the NSO survey from 2017–18, ASER from 2023 and 2024, and the trend data from 1980–2011.
- ASER covers rural youth aged 14–18, not undergraduates, and gives its Kerala figures only as thresholds.
- The census phone item counts phones used during fishing, so it is a weak proxy for household or student ownership.
- The shares computed here take persons above five years as the eligible group. The method reproduces the report's published figures to within rounding.
- No primary data have been collected, so the paper reports no findings on students' proficiency or platform use.

10. Conclusion

Digital platforms have put English within reach of almost every rural young person in Kerala who has a smartphone. Whether that reach turns into proficiency for students from the coastal fishing communities of Thrissur is not yet known. The secondary data reviewed here show a small fisher community of 20,961 people with a strong schooling base, thinner degree-level schooling, high poverty, wide phone use, mobile coverage in every fishing village and four colleges within its villages. They also show heavy social media use among Kerala's young people and modest basic English reading among rural youth nationally. They show nothing about how students from these communities use platforms for English or how well they use it.

The primary phase will supply that evidence. The secondary analysis tells it where to look: at how platforms are used and not at whether they can be reached, at degree-level progression, and at the gender gap in private smartphone access. The aim is to give teachers, colleges and policymakers a clearer picture of which platform practices are associated with proficiency among first-generation learners from coastal communities, so that support can build on what students already do.

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