STRENGTHENING MALAYALAM LANGUAGE COMPETENCY AMONG D.EL.ED STUDENT-TEACHERS IN KERALA: CHALLENGES, PEDAGOGICAL GAPS AND TECHNOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

Manjula K.N, Dr Jameela T

Abstract

Language competency in the mother tongue is vital for teachers' academic and professional growth. In Kerala, Malayalam serves as both a medium of instruction and a cultural marker, yet a noticeable decline in proficiency among D.El.Ed student-teachers have raised concerns. This study assessed their Malayalam language competency, identified contributing factors, and explored pedagogical and technological solutions for improvement. Grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and the CLT approach, the descriptive study used a language test and a structured questionnaire with 100 student-teachers. Percentage and mean analyses indicated low proficiency in reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Major causes included English dominance, outdated curricula, ineffective teaching, limited exposure to authentic content, and minimal use of digital tools. The study recommends curriculum revision, communicative strategies, AI-based tools, and greater cultural engagement to strengthen Malayalam proficiency and support linguistic preservation in Kerala.

Keywords: Malayalam language, D.El.Ed student-teachers, mother-tongue education, communicative language teaching, digital learning tools, Kerala

1. Introduction

Mother tongue education plays a vital role in concept formation, emotional development and academic success. For student-teachers in Kerala, Malayalam is indispensable for effective classroom instruction, learner engagement, and cultural transmission. Despite Kerala's high literacy rate, a steady decline in Malayalam competence among teacher-trainees has been observed in recent years. The shift towards English-medium instruction, declining reading habits, and conventional rote-based teaching practices have weakened students' linguistic foundation in Malayalam.

As future teachers, D.El.Ed students require strong proficiency in Malayalam to teach effectively at the primary level. However, inconsistencies in curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, and language exposure have resulted in notable skill deficiencies in reading, writing, and oral expression. This study aims to investigate the current state of Malayalam language proficiency among D.El.Ed trainees and identify relevant pedagogical and technological interventions.

2. Review of Literature

Previous studies indicate that student-teachers demonstrate inadequate proficiency in core language skills, including reading comprehension, structured writing, grammar accuracy, and vocabulary usage. Gafoor and Sujilarani found significant deficits in language fundamentals among teacher education students. SCERT Kerala emphasized learner-centred curricula but observed a lack of effective implementation. Pratheesh and Reema noted a growing disinterest in Malayalam due to English dominance, outdated teaching methods, and insufficient exposure to literary resources.

Theoretical perspectives such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Communicative Language Teaching suggest that language is acquired effectively through meaningful input, social interaction, and functional communication. These frameworks indicate that an interactive and immersive environment is essential for improving language competence.

Recent developments in digital technologies, including AI-based language learning tools, gamification, and virtual reading platforms, offer new possibilities for revitalising regional language education. However, there is limited empirical evidence on the integration of such tools for Malayalam language enhancement among D.El.Ed student-teachers, revealing a significant research gap.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To assess the Malayalam language competency level of D.El.Ed student-teachers
- To identify factors affecting their language proficiency
- To examine the effectiveness of current pedagogical methods
- To explore technological support systems for language improvement

- To suggest strategies for strengthening Malayalam competence

4. Research Questions

- What is the level of Malayalam proficiency among D.El.Ed student-teachers?

- What academic and social factors influence their language development?

- How effective are existing teaching strategies?

- Can technological tools enhance Malayalam language learning?

5. Methodology

The present study adopted a descriptive survey method, which is considered suitable for assessing the existing status of a phenomenon as it naturally occurs in a given population. This research design was selected because the primary objective of the study was to examine and describe the current level of Malayalam language competency among D.El.Ed. student-teachers in Kerala, rather than to manipulate any variables or introduce experimental interventions. The descriptive survey method enabled the researcher to systematically collect data from a defined group and analyse patterns, relationships, and variations in language competence across different institutional contexts.

The sample for the study consisted of 100 D.El.Ed. student-teachers drawn from selected teacher education institutions in Kerala. These participants represented a cross-section of students preparing to enter the elementary teaching profession. A purposive sampling technique was employed in the selection of the sample. This method was used to intentionally choose participants who best represented the population relevant to the study — namely, student-teachers who's medium of instruction and future professional role are closely linked with the Malayalam language. The selected group included students from varying educational and socio-cultural backgrounds to ensure diversity and relevance of the data.

Two major tools were used for data collection. The first was a Malayalam Language Competency Test, which was carefully prepared to assess the key language skills of the participants, including grammar and usage, vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and written expression. This test helped in determining the actual proficiency level of the student-teachers in the Malayalam language across different linguistic domains. The second tool was a Structured Questionnaire on Language Learning Experience, which gathered information regarding the learners' academic background, medium of previous instruction, exposure to Malayalam in daily life, reading habits, use of digital media, and attitudes towards

the Malayalam language. This quantitative and qualitative information provided deeper insights into the factors influencing their language competency.

For data analysis, the collected responses were systematically tabulated and interpreted using percentage analysis and the mean score method. Percentage analysis was applied to determine the distribution of students across different levels of language competency and to understand the proportion of students showing low, moderate, or high proficiency. The mean score method was used to calculate the average performance level of the students on the Malayalam Language Competency Test. These statistical techniques helped in identifying overall trends and patterns in the data and enabled meaningful comparison between different groups of student-teachers. The combination of these methods provided a clear and objective understanding of the current status of Malayalam language proficiency among the selected population.

6. Results

Table 1

Level of Malayalam Competency

Skill Area	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)
Reading	52	35	13
Writing	58	32	10
Grammar	55	37	8
Vocabulary	60	28	12
Oral	48	40	12

.

Table 1, Level of Malayalam Language Competency, and diagram 1, Level of Malayalam Competency, present the percentage distribution of student-teachers across

three levels of language competence—low, moderate, and high—within five key skill areas: Reading, Writing, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Oral Communication.

In the area of reading, a majority of the student-teachers (52%) fall under the *low level* of competence. A further 35% exhibit a *moderate level*, while only 13% demonstrate *high reading proficiency*. This indicates that more than half of the future elementary educators struggle with basic reading comprehension in their mother tongue. Such low levels of reading proficiency raise serious concerns, as reading forms the foundation for content understanding, critical thinking, and instructional delivery.

A similar trend is observed in writing skills, where 58% of the respondents were categorised under the *low proficiency* level, 32% under *moderate*, and only 10% under *high*. This suggests a major deficiency in the ability to express ideas, construct meaningful sentences, and write coherent responses in Malayalam. The result reflects limited exposure to creative writing, formal composition tasks, and structural language practice during their academic preparation.

With respect to grammar, 55% of the student-teachers fall into the *low category*, 37% are at a *moderate level*, and only 8% have *high grammatical competence*. This weak understanding of grammatical structures directly affects both spoken and written language proficiency, reinforcing the argument that explicit grammar instruction has been insufficient or outdated in the current curriculum.

The findings related to vocabulary are equally concerning. As much as 60% of the respondents display *low vocabulary knowledge*, while 28% show *moderate* and only 12% demonstrate a *high level* of vocabulary proficiency. A poor lexical base limits comprehension, expression, and academic confidence. This can be directly linked to reduced reading habits, limited cultural exposure, and minimal engagement with Malayalam literature in both formal and informal settings.

In the domain of oral communication, while the performance is slightly better, still 48% of the student-teachers are found to be at *low competence level*, 40% at *moderate*, and only 12% at a *high level*. This indicates that even spoken Malayalam, which is usually more commonly used in daily life, is weakly developed in an academic and professional context. This may be attributed to the increasing dominance of English in academic discourse, social media interactions, and peer communication.

Overall, the data clearly indicate that the majority of D.El.Ed student-teachers fall within the low to moderate categories across all language domains, with a remarkably small percentage demonstrating high proficiency. This underlines the urgent need for targeted pedagogical interventions and curriculum reform in teacher education programmes.

Diagram 1:

Level of Malayalam Competency
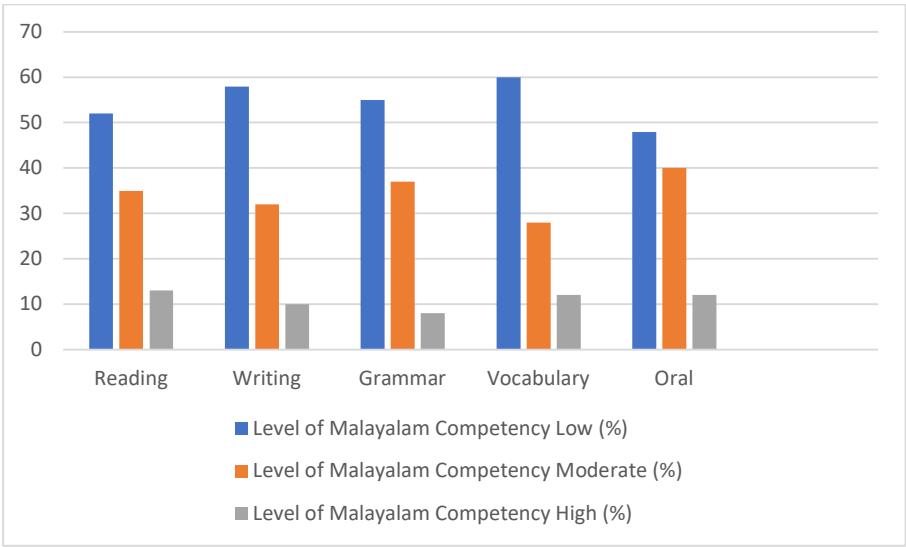
6.2 Factors Affecting Malayalam Language Proficiency

Table 2 Factors Affecting Proficiency and diagram 2 Factors Affecting Proficiency percentage identifies the most significant factors contributing to the decline in Malayalam language proficiency among student-teachers, as reported through the structured questionnaire.

The most prominent factor is the dominance of English, which was acknowledged by 72% of the participants. This finding confirms the widespread perception that English has overtaken Malayalam in higher education, professional communication, and digital spaces.

While English is undoubtedly important for global connectivity, its excessive prioritisation has resulted in the marginalisation of the mother tongue among younger generations.

Closely related to this is the problem of poor reading habits, identified by 70% of the respondents. Many student-teachers admitted that they rarely read Malayalam books, newspapers, or literary works, preferring instead to consume content in English or through visual-digital media. The lack of consistent reading practice significantly affects vocabulary development, comprehension ability, and writing fluency.

Another major concern highlighted by 65% of the participants is the outdated nature of the existing curriculum. The syllabus has remained largely theoretical and examination-oriented, with m   inimal scope for practical language use, creative expression, or integration of contemporary literary forms. This disconnect between curriculum and real-life language requirements contributes heavily to declining proficiency.

Furthermore, 61% of respondents pointed to ineffective teaching methodology as a contributing factor. Traditional lecture-based instruction, lack of student interaction, minimal use of audiovisual aids, and absence of communicative practice have limited students' ability to internalise and use language meaningfully. Learners are often passive recipients rather than active participants in the learning process.

The lack of digital support was also identified by 54% of the participants. In an era dominated by technology, the absence of Malayalam-based e-resources, applications, language-learning platforms, and interactive digital content places the language at a disadvantage compared to English. Without digital presence, the relevance and accessibility of Malayalam are greatly diminished among the younger generation.

Finally, limited cultural exposure (49%) emerged as another important factor. A decline in participation in cultural activities such as folk arts, drama, storytelling, literary festivals, and local traditions has weakened the emotional and cultural connection to the language. When language is detached from cultural experiences, its value and vitality naturally decline.

Together, these findings reveal that the decline in Malayalam language competence is not the result of a single cause, but rather a complex interaction of educational, technological, social, and cultural factors. Therefore, addressing this issue requires a multidimensional

strategy that combines curriculum reform, innovative pedagogy, technological integration, and cultural revival.

Table 2

Factors Affecting Proficiency

Factors	Percentage
Dominance of English	72
Outdated curriculum	65
Poor reading habit	70
Ineffective methodology	61
Lack of digital support	54
Limited cultural exposure	49

Diagram 2

Factors Affecting Proficiency Percentage
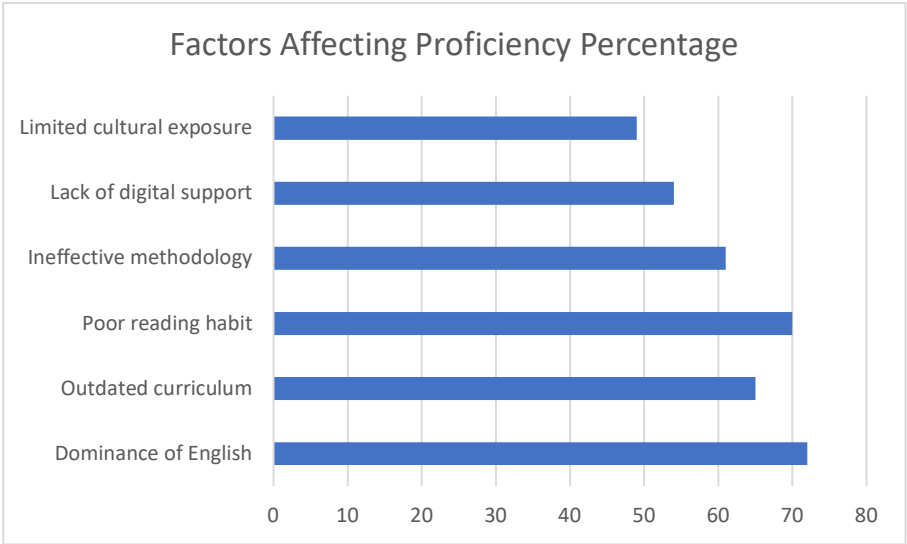
7. Discussion

The findings of the present study confirm a significant and worrying decline in Malayalam language competence among D.El.Ed student-teachers in Kerala. Most participants demonstrated only low to moderate proficiency across essential language domains such as reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and oral communication. This decline is not merely an individual limitation but appears to be strongly influenced by a combination of systemic, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors. Among these, curriculum inadequacy, limited institutional emphasis on mother-tongue instruction, and insufficient exposure to authentic Malayalam literature have emerged as major contributors. The existing syllabus is largely theoretical and outdated, failing to engage learners in meaningful, functional, and context-based language use.

Furthermore, the growing overdependence on English—both in academic settings and informal communication—has gradually marginalized Malayalam from everyday intellectual and instructional spaces. This has resulted in reduced confidence and fluency among student-teachers, who are expected to serve as linguistic role models in elementary classrooms. Contemporary classroom practices also appear to prioritize rote memorisation over communicative competence, thereby limiting opportunities for creative expression, critical thinking, and contextual language application.

In this context, the integration of AI-based platforms, digital storytelling tools, Malayalam reading applications, and interactive language-learning software holds significant promise for revitalizing interest and engagement with the mother tongue. Such technologies can provide personalized, immersive, and student-centred learning environments that encourage active participation. In addition, the promotion of collaborative learning spaces—such as group discussions, peer teaching, and project-based tasks—can foster communicative confidence and linguistic accuracy.

Equally important is the role of cultural engagement in strengthening emotional and linguistic connections with the language. Participation in drama, literature circles, poetry recitation, film appreciation, and the exploration of local folklore and oral traditions can significantly deepen students' attachment to Malayalam as a living and expressive medium. When language learning is tied to cultural identity, heritage, and creativity, its relevance and vitality are naturally reinforced. Therefore, a holistic, technology-supported and culturally

enriched pedagogical strategy is essential to reverse the present decline and ensure the development of linguistically competent, culturally grounded, and professionally effective future teachers.

8. Suggestions and Educational Implications

In light of the findings of the present study, several constructive suggestions and educational implications can be proposed to address the declining Malayalam language proficiency among D.El.Ed student-teachers in Kerala. These recommendations are intended not only to enhance linguistic competence but also to strengthen the overall quality of teacher education and classroom pedagogy in elementary education.

First, there is an urgent need to revise and modernise the existing D.El.Ed Malayalam curriculum. The current syllabus must be reformulated to reflect contemporary linguistic realities, integrating functional language skills, communicative components, and practical applications. Greater emphasis should be placed on reading comprehension, creative writing, spoken communication, and critical appreciation of Malayalam literature rather than mere theoretical knowledge. The inclusion of modern texts, regional literature, and digital content will make the curriculum more relevant and engaging for learners.

Second, the introduction of well-equipped language laboratories in teacher training institutions is essential. Language labs can provide an interactive, technology-supported environment where student-teachers can practise pronunciation, listening skills, accent neutralisation, vocabulary development, and conversational fluency. Regular sessions in these labs will help reduce fear, develop confidence, and promote mastery over language structures in a systematic manner.

Third, the systematic implementation of a communicative and task-based language teaching approach must be encouraged across all D.El.Ed institutions. Through activities such as role plays, simulations, debates, storytelling, group discussions, and presentations, students can enhance their expressive abilities in real-life contexts. Task-based learning also allows student-teachers to use language for meaningful purposes, thereby strengthening both fluency and accuracy.

Fourth, the integration of AI-enabled and digital learning platforms should be prioritised in teacher preparation programmes. Tools such as Malayalam language-learning apps, speech-recognition software, digital storytelling tools, and virtual reading platforms can provide personalised feedback, track learner progress, and increase learner motivation. The use of blended learning and flipped classroom strategies can further enrich the language-learning experience.

Fifth, consistent efforts must be made to promote reading culture and creative writing activities within teacher education institutions. Regular reading hours, book clubs, literary discussions, poetry appreciation, journaling, essay writing, and drama performances in Malayalam should be incorporated into the academic calendar. Such practices not only improve linguistic skills but also foster emotional attachment and cultural sensitivity towards the language.

Finally, continuous professional development for faculty members is equally important. Teacher educators must be regularly trained in modern language teaching strategies, digital pedagogy, assessment techniques, and curriculum innovation. Workshops, refresher courses, seminars, and certification programmes can enable them to incorporate innovative language teaching methodologies in their practices. A well-trained and linguistically confident faculty will, in turn, inspire and guide student-teachers more effectively.

In conclusion, the successful implementation of these suggestions requires collaborative efforts from po licymakers, curriculum developers, institutional administrators, teacher educators, and the student-teacher community. A comprehensive, technology-supported, and culturally rooted reform in language education will ensure the development of competent, confident, and culturally grounded future teachers who are well-equipped to preserve and promote the richness of the Malayalam language.

The survival and growth of Malayalam as a dynamic educational language depend on empowering future teachers with strong linguistic foundations. The study firmly establishes that targeted pedagogical reform combined with technological integration can significantly enhance Malayalam competence among D.El.Ed student-teachers. Strengthening mother tongue education will improve instructional quality and ensure cultural sustainability.

References:

- Gafoor, K.A., & Sujilarani, P. (2013). Language proficiency of teacher trainees in Kerala. *Journal of Educational Research*, 5(2), 45–52.

- SCERT Kerala. (2018). *Revised curriculum framework for teacher education in Kerala.* Thiruvananthapuram.

- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Harvard University Press.

- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon.

- Pratheesh, K. & Reema, S. (2024). Regional language decline in Kerala. *International Journal of Language Education*, 4(1), 22–35.

- Anderson, R. C. (1999). *Research foundations for wide reading*. American Educational Research Association.

- Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (5th ed.). Multilingual Matters.

- Bialystok, E. (2001). *Bilingualism in development: Language, literacy, and cognition*. Cambridge University Press.

- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.

- Coleman, J. et al. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity*. US Government Printing Office.

- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy*. Multilingual Matters.

- Derbyshire, D., & Pullum, G. K. (2006). *Handbook of descriptive linguistics*. De Gruyter.

- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.

- Field, A. (2013). *Discovering statistics using SPSS*. SAGE Publications.

- Gardner, R. C. (2010). *Motivation and second language acquisition*. Peter Lang.

- Halliday, M. A. K. (1985). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Edward Arnold.

- Hymes, D. (1972). *On communicative competence*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Johnson, K. (2008). *An introduction to foreign language learning and teaching*. Longman.

- Kothari, C. R. (2004). *Research methodology: Methods and techniques*. New Age International.

- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.

- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned*. Oxford University Press.

- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis*. SAGE.

- Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. (2006). Technological pedagogical content knowledge. *Teachers College Record*, 108(6), 1017–1054.

- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.

- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. SAGE.

- Piaget, J. (1977). *The development of thought*. Viking Press.

- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1–6.

- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

- Salaberry, M. R., & Burch, C. (2021). *The Cambridge handbook of technology and language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

- Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Verbal behavior*. Appleton-Century-Crofts.

- Thorne, S. L. (2010). The intercultural turn. *Modern Language Journal*, 94(2), 199–217.

- Tomlinson, B. (2013). *Developing materials for language teaching*. Bloomsbury.

- UNESCO. (2016). *If you don't understand, how can you learn?* Global Education Report.

- Warschauer, M. (2004). *Technology and social inclusion*. MIT Press.

- Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 64–72.