

## A Comparative Study of Traditional and Modern Methods in Bengali Language Teaching

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### Abstract:

*The teaching of Bengali (Bangla) language has undergone significant transformation over the past two centuries. From the classical grammar-translation approach rooted in colonial educational structures to contemporary communicative and technology-enhanced pedagogies, Bengali language instruction reflects broader shifts in linguistic theory, sociopolitical contexts, and technological advancement. This research article presents a comprehensive comparative study of traditional and modern methods in Bengali language teaching. It examines historical foundations, pedagogical principles, classroom practices, curriculum design, assessment models, teacher roles, learner engagement, sociolinguistic considerations, and the integration of digital tools. Drawing from linguistic theory, educational psychology, and South Asian language policy, the study evaluates strengths and limitations of both paradigms and proposes a blended, context-sensitive framework for future Bengali language education.*

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### Introduction:

Bengali, or Bangla, is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and a major linguistic and cultural force in the Indian subcontinent. In India, Bengali is one of the languages recognized under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution and functions as the official language of the state of West Bengal and one of the official languages of Tripura. It is also widely spoken in the Barak Valley region of Assam, as well as in Jharkhand, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and metropolitan centers such as Delhi and Mumbai due to migration. According to the Census of India, Bengali is among the most spoken languages in the country, reflecting its demographic and cultural significance.

The literary heritage of Bengali in India spans several centuries, from medieval Vaishnava poetry and Mangalkavya traditions to the Bengal Renaissance and modernist literature. The contributions of figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian Nobel Laureate in Literature, and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, whose work shaped early nationalist thought, demonstrate the profound intellectual and

cultural impact of the language. Bengali literature, theatre, cinema, and music continue to shape regional and national discourse in India.

In the Indian context, the Bengali language is deeply intertwined with regional identity, cultural pride, and educational development. The Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century, centered in Kolkata, played a pivotal role in modernizing education, reforming prose style, and standardizing the language. Educational reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar significantly influenced Bengali pedagogy through textbook production, orthographic reform, and curricular innovation.

**Objectives:** This research article presents a comprehensive comparative study of traditional and modern methods in Bengali language teaching. It examines historical foundations, pedagogical principles, classroom practices, curriculum design, assessment models, teacher roles, learner engagement, sociolinguistic considerations, and the integration of digital tools.

### **Significance of the Study:**

This study is academically and practically significant for contemporary Bengali language education in India, especially in regions such as West Bengal and Tripura. By comparing traditional and modern teaching methods, it identifies their respective strengths, limitations, and contextual relevance. The research contributes to curriculum development by proposing integration of grammar-based and literary approaches with communicative, competency-based models. It also informs teacher education by highlighting the need for learner-centered strategies and improved assessment practices. Additionally, the study addresses sociolinguistic factors such as dialect diversity and the shift from Shadhu Bhasha to Cholit Bhasha, promoting inclusive pedagogy.

### **Traditional Methods in Bengali Language Teaching:**

Traditional Bengali language pedagogy in India has historically evolved within a literary-humanistic framework shaped by colonial education policies, Sanskritic grammatical traditions, and examination-oriented schooling (Seth, 2007; Kumar, 1991). These approaches, still visible in many government and aided institutions in West Bengal and Tripura, emphasize textual authority, grammatical rigor, and teacher-centered instruction (Kumar, 1991). The dominant strands of this tradition may be grouped into four broad approaches: the Grammar-Translation Method, rote memorization and recitation, literary-centric pedagogy, and the teacher authority model (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

**Grammar–Translation Method (GTM):** The Grammar–Translation Method (GTM) has long been central to Bengali language instruction, particularly at the secondary and collegiate levels (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Rooted in nineteenth-century colonial pedagogy and classical Sanskrit grammar (Seth, 2007), GTM treats language primarily as a structural system to be mastered through explicit instruction in syntax and morphology. Classroom practices typically include detailed explanations of case markers (vibhakti), verb conjugations, compound formation, and sandhi rules, followed by translation exercises between Bengali and English or Hindi (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Literary passages—often drawn from canonical authors such as **Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay**—are dissected for grammatical accuracy and rhetorical devices rather than communicative meaning.

Scholars of language pedagogy have noted that GTM privileges accuracy and textual comprehension over fluency and interaction (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In the Bengali context, this method has several advantages. It provides learners with a strong grammatical foundation, enabling them to read complex prose and poetry with precision. It also supports literary appreciation, particularly of classical and Renaissance texts that employ elevated diction. Moreover, in examination-driven systems such as state board

assessments, GTM aligns well with written tests emphasizing translation, parsing, and essay writing (Kumar, 1991).

However, the limitations of GTM are increasingly evident. The method tends to neglect spoken Bengali (Cholit Bhasha), resulting in learners who can analyze texts but struggle with spontaneous communication. It fosters low communicative competence and reinforces teacher-centered classrooms where learners remain passive recipients of knowledge (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In multilingual Indian settings, this rigidity can further distance classroom language from students' lived linguistic realities (Kramersch, 1993).

**Rote Memorization and Recitation:** Rote memorization and recitation constitute another longstanding pillar of traditional Bengali pedagogy, particularly in primary schools and rural contexts (Seth, 2007). This approach emphasizes repetition, memorization of poems, copy-writing exercises (likhon charcha), and dictation drills. Students frequently memorize verses by **Rabindranath Tagore** and other canonical poets, reciting them aloud to internalize rhythm, pronunciation, and moral themes.

Historically, memorization has been integral to South Asian educational traditions, predating colonial schooling (Seth, 2007). In Bengali classrooms, this method strengthens orthographic competence, handwriting skills, and phonological awareness. Dictation exercises reinforce spelling conventions and standard pronunciation, particularly important in a language with complex conjunct consonants and orthographic variations.

Yet, while rote learning promotes retention and textual familiarity, it often limits higher-order thinking skills. Students may reproduce texts accurately without fully comprehending meaning or engaging critically with content. Contemporary educational theorists argue that excessive reliance on memorization restricts creativity, interpretive analysis, and communicative use of language (Freire, 1970). Thus, although memorization remains culturally valued, its pedagogical exclusivity presents challenges in modern classrooms.

**Literary-Centric Pedagogy:** At the secondary and tertiary levels, Bengali language teaching has traditionally been literature-dominated (Kramersch, 1993). Canonical texts form the backbone of curricula in schools and universities, especially in institutions affiliated with universities in **Kolkata**. Instruction centers on aesthetic appreciation, rhetorical analysis, historical context, and moral interpretation. Students study classical poetry, nineteenth-century prose, and modernist fiction as embodiments of linguistic and cultural excellence.

This literary-centric model reflects the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance and the humanistic orientation of Indian higher education (Kumar, 1991). It positions literature as the highest expression of language, thereby cultivating cultural literacy and historical consciousness. Through engagement with canonical authors, learners develop interpretive skills and familiarity with sophisticated vocabulary and stylistic forms.

However, this emphasis on canonical literature may marginalize colloquial and contemporary usage. Everyday spoken Bengali, media discourse, and digital communication practices receive limited attention. As a result, students may excel in textual analysis but remain disconnected from functional language use in real-world contexts. Applied linguists caution that overemphasis on literary norms can create a gap between academic language and communicative competence (Kramersch, 1993).

**Teacher Authority Model:** Underlying these traditional methods is a hierarchical teacher authority model (Kumar, 1991). In this structure, the teacher functions as the primary transmitter of knowledge, while students assume largely passive roles. Classroom interaction is limited, with lectures, note dictation, and question-answer sessions dominating instructional time. Such pedagogy reflects broader South Asian

educational culture, where respect for authority and textual fidelity are deeply embedded social values (Kumar, 1991).

The teacher authority model ensures discipline, curricular coverage, and efficient management of large classrooms—common in government schools across eastern India. It also reinforces standardized norms of grammar and pronunciation. Nevertheless, the lack of interactive engagement restricts learner autonomy, collaborative learning, and communicative experimentation. Modern educational research consistently demonstrates that student-centered interaction enhances retention, motivation, and language acquisition outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978).

### **Modern Methods in Bengali Language Teaching:**

The transformation of Bengali language pedagogy in recent decades reflects broader shifts in applied linguistics, educational psychology, and globalization. Influenced by communicative theories of language, constructivist learning models, and digital innovation, modern methods seek to move beyond structural mastery toward meaningful interaction and contextualized use (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In the Indian context, particularly in urban centers such as Kolkata, these approaches are increasingly visible in private schools, higher education institutions, and experimental curricula. The principal strands of modern Bengali pedagogy include Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), technology-enhanced learning, and multiliteracies-based sociocultural approaches.

**Communicative Language Teaching (CLT):** Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) conceptualizes language primarily as a tool for communication rather than merely a system of rules (Hymes, 1972; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Its core principles emphasize task-based interaction, real-life contextualization, learner participation, and an initial prioritization of fluency over grammatical accuracy. In Bengali classrooms, CLT practices include role-play in everyday situations such as markets or family conversations, dialogue exercises using colloquial Bengali (Cholit Bhasha), and structured group discussions on contemporary topics.

The communicative approach aligns with Dell Hymes' notion of communicative competence, which extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include sociolinguistic and pragmatic awareness (Hymes, 1972). In practice, CLT enhances speaking and listening skills, builds pragmatic competence, and encourages learner autonomy through collaborative work (Littlewood, 1981). Students learn to negotiate meaning, express personal opinions, and adapt language to context.

Nevertheless, CLT presents certain limitations. When implemented without sufficient balance, it may weaken grammatical precision and reduce systematic attention to morphology and syntax. Furthermore, its success depends heavily on teacher training and classroom management skills—resources not uniformly available across Indian schools (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Thus, while CLT promotes communicative fluency, its outcomes vary depending on institutional support and pedagogical expertise.

**Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT):** Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) extends communicative principles by organizing instruction around meaningful tasks rather than discrete grammatical units (Ellis, 2003). In Bengali language classrooms, tasks may include writing emails in Bengali, conducting peer interviews, preparing short presentations, or creating digital stories rooted in local culture. These activities simulate authentic language use and require learners to integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills.

Unlike traditional grammar-focused instruction, TBLT does not isolate linguistic forms in advance; instead, it allows grammatical structures to emerge organically from communicative need (Willis, 1996). Research



suggests that task-based approaches foster deeper engagement and improve retention by situating language in purposeful action (Ellis, 2003). In multilingual Indian settings, TBLT also supports collaborative learning and peer scaffolding, consistent with sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

However, the effectiveness of TBLT depends on careful task design and assessment strategies. Without structured feedback, learners may fossilize errors or focus primarily on task completion rather than linguistic refinement. Hence, balanced integration with explicit grammar instruction remains essential.

**Technology-Enhanced Learning:** Technology-enhanced learning represents a significant development in modern Bengali pedagogy. Digital tools—including language learning applications, online Bengali dictionaries, virtual classrooms, and multimedia storytelling platforms—have expanded access to instructional resources. YouTube lessons and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) provide supplementary grammar explanations, pronunciation models, and literary lectures, democratizing language education beyond physical classrooms (Chapelle, 2003).

In diaspora communities in the United States and the United Kingdom, weekend Bengali schools increasingly employ interactive whiteboards, online quizzes, and hybrid teaching models to maintain heritage language competence among second-generation learners. Such digital integration reflects broader trends in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which emphasize interactivity, learner autonomy, and multimodal engagement (Chapelle, 2003).

In India, especially in technologically advanced urban institutions, blended learning models combine face-to-face instruction with online assignments and collaborative platforms. While technology enhances accessibility and motivation, disparities in infrastructure between urban and rural schools create uneven implementation. Moreover, digital pedagogy requires both technical literacy and pedagogical adaptation to ensure meaningful learning rather than superficial engagement.

**Multiliteracies and the Sociocultural Approach:** Modern Bengali pedagogy increasingly incorporates multiliteracies and sociocultural perspectives, acknowledging that language learning is embedded in social practice and identity formation (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This approach recognizes dialectal variation, code-switching between Bengali and English, and differences between urban and rural linguistic usage.

The sociocultural approach draws on Vygotskian theory, emphasizing interaction, scaffolding, and the co-construction of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). It encourages learners to analyze media texts, social media discourse, advertisements, and contemporary narratives alongside canonical literature. By validating linguistic diversity and contextual usage, this model promotes inclusive pedagogy and critical language awareness.

However, integrating multiliteracies into formal curricula can be challenging in examination-oriented systems that prioritize standardized norms. Teachers must navigate tensions between preserving linguistic heritage and embracing evolving communicative forms.

### **Curriculum Design:**

Curriculum design in Bengali language teaching reveals a clear shift from content-centered transmission to competency-oriented learning. Traditional curricula, especially in state board systems in West Bengal and Tripura, have historically followed a linear grammar sequence combined with prescribed canonical literature and standardized examinations. Language learning was organized around discrete grammatical units—such as case endings, verb paradigms, and syntactic transformations—progressing systematically across grade levels. Literary texts, often drawn from established authors of the Bengal Renaissance and early modern period, were treated as authoritative models of linguistic correctness and moral instruction. Assessment



frameworks reinforced this structure through annual high-stakes examinations emphasizing textual reproduction and rule-based accuracy (Kumar, 1991).

In contrast, modern curriculum design reflects competency-based educational reforms influenced by communicative language theory and constructivist pedagogy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Rather than organizing learning strictly around grammatical progression, contemporary syllabi prioritize communicative competence, integrated skill development, and contextual language use. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are treated as interrelated processes rather than isolated domains. Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) models, introduced in various Indian boards, encourage formative assessment and reflective learning. Such reforms align with broader educational policies emphasizing learner-centered outcomes, adaptability, and skill integration (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

### **Assessment Practices:**

Assessment practices further illustrate the divergence between traditional and modern approaches. Traditionally, Bengali language assessment has been dominated by written examinations conducted at the end of academic terms. Students were required to reproduce memorized essays, translate passages between Bengali and English or Hindi, and provide grammatical analysis of prescribed texts. This system favored retention, textual familiarity, and structural precision. While effective in standardizing evaluation across large student populations, it often limited opportunities for creative expression and spontaneous language use (Freire, 1970).

Modern assessment practices aim to diversify evaluation methods and measure communicative as well as cognitive competencies. Portfolio assessment, oral presentations, group projects, and performance-based tasks have become more common in progressive institutions. These approaches emphasize process over product and encourage learners to demonstrate language use in authentic contexts (Brown, 2004). Project-based evaluation—such as preparing interviews, digital narratives, or community surveys—integrates linguistic knowledge with critical thinking and collaboration. However, the integration of such assessment methods within examination-oriented systems remains uneven, particularly in resource-constrained schools.

### **Classroom Interaction:**

Classroom interaction patterns represent another key point of contrast. Traditional Bengali classrooms have largely been lecture-dominant, characterized by one-way communication from teacher to students. The teacher explains grammar rules, interprets literary passages, and dictates notes, while students listen, copy, and occasionally respond to factual questions. This model reflects hierarchical educational traditions in South Asia, where authority and discipline are central values (Kumar, 1991). Although efficient for managing large classrooms, such pedagogy restricts dialogue and learner agency.

Modern classrooms increasingly emphasize interaction, collaboration, and peer learning. Pair work, small-group discussion, role-play, and peer feedback sessions create opportunities for meaningful language exchange. Drawing upon sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), contemporary pedagogy views interaction as essential to cognitive and linguistic growth. Students actively construct knowledge through negotiation of meaning rather than passive reception. While these methods foster communicative competence and engagement, they require smaller class sizes, teacher facilitation skills, and flexible classroom environments to function effectively.

### **Sociolinguistic Dimensions:**

**Standard vs. Colloquial Forms:** Sociolinguistic considerations significantly shape Bengali language teaching. Traditional pedagogy privileged Shadhu Bhasha, the high literary register associated with classical

prose and formal writing. Mastery of this register was considered synonymous with linguistic refinement and cultural literacy. However, everyday communication in contemporary Bengal largely employs Cholit Bhasha, the colloquial standard that gained prominence in the twentieth century. Modern teaching practices increasingly prioritize Cholit Bhasha to ensure functional communicative competence and alignment with real-life usage (Kramsch, 1993). This shift reflects a broader recognition that language teaching must correspond to lived linguistic realities rather than exclusively to classical norms.

**Dialect Inclusion:** Modern approaches also acknowledge regional and social varieties of Bengali, recognizing dialectal diversity as a pedagogical resource rather than a deficit. Varieties such as Sylheti, Chittagonian, and Rarhi represent significant linguistic traditions within the Bengali speech community. In earlier models, such dialects were often suppressed in favor of standardized forms promoted by institutions such as Bangla Academy, which played a key role in codifying orthographic and lexical norms. Contemporary sociolinguistic pedagogy, however, encourages awareness of variation, code-switching, and multilingual identities. Such inclusion fosters linguistic tolerance and supports learners from diverse backgrounds, particularly in multilingual Indian classrooms (Hymes, 1972).

### **Teacher Training and Professional Development:**

Teacher preparation constitutes a decisive factor in the success of pedagogical reform. Traditional teacher training in Bengali emphasized mastery of grammar, philology, and literary scholarship. Teachers were expected to possess deep textual knowledge and interpretive authority, reflecting the humanistic orientation of earlier curricula (Kumar, 1991). Pedagogical techniques, however, often received limited formal attention.

Modern teacher education programs increasingly incorporate pedagogical psychology, digital literacy, classroom management strategies, and inclusive education principles. Training now emphasizes learner diversity, formative assessment, and technology integration alongside linguistic expertise (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Workshops, in-service programs, and online professional development platforms support teachers in adapting to communicative and task-based methodologies.

Despite these reforms, teacher readiness remains uneven. Structural constraints—such as overcrowded classrooms, limited infrastructure, and examination pressures—continue to shape classroom practice. Consequently, sustainable reform in Bengali language teaching depends not only on curricular redesign but also on sustained investment in teacher professional development and institutional support.

### **Toward a Blended Framework:**

The comparative analysis of traditional and modern methods in Bengali language teaching suggests that neither paradigm, in isolation, sufficiently addresses the complex linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical needs of contemporary learners. In the Indian context—particularly in linguistically dynamic regions such as West Bengal—Bengali pedagogy must balance structural rigor with communicative adaptability. A blended framework, therefore, offers a pragmatic and context-sensitive alternative that synthesizes the strengths of both traditions while mitigating their limitations (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

A balanced Bengali language pedagogy should integrate structural grammar instruction derived from traditional approaches with communicative practice drawn from modern methodologies (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Structural instruction ensures clarity in morphology, syntax, and orthography—critical in a language characterized by complex inflectional systems and conjunct consonants. At the same time, communicative practice fosters fluency, pragmatic competence, and learner engagement. Literary appreciation must remain central, given Bengali's rich textual heritage, but literature should function not

merely as an object of analysis but as a medium for dialogue and interpretation. Digital tools further expand access, encourage multimodal literacy, and connect classroom learning with contemporary communication practices (Chapelle, 2003). Finally, sociolinguistic awareness—including recognition of dialectal variation and code-switching—ensures inclusivity and relevance in multilingual classrooms (Hymes, 1972).

### **Proposed Hybrid Model:**

**Grammar in Context:** Rather than teaching grammar as isolated rules, instructors can embed structural instruction within meaningful discourse. For instance, verb forms and case markers may be introduced through short narratives or dialogues, allowing learners to observe patterns before formal explanation. This contextualized approach preserves grammatical rigor while promoting functional understanding (Ellis, 2003).

**Literature as a Communicative Resource:** Canonical and contemporary texts should be used as catalysts for interaction rather than solely for textual analysis. Poems and short stories can prompt group discussions, debates, and creative reinterpretations. Such an approach maintains cultural continuity while aligning literary study with communicative competence (Kramsch, 1993).

**Technology-Assisted Writing:** Digital platforms, online dictionaries, collaborative documents, and multimedia storytelling tools can enhance writing instruction. Technology-assisted drafting and peer review processes encourage revision, autonomy, and audience awareness. Blended learning environments also extend language exposure beyond the classroom (Chapelle, 2003).

**Project-Based Learning:** Project-based tasks—such as community interviews, oral history documentation, or digital magazine creation—integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. These tasks situate language learning within authentic social contexts and promote collaborative inquiry (Vygotsky, 1978). In multilingual Indian settings, project-based learning also enables learners to draw upon their diverse linguistic repertoires.

**Dialect Awareness Modules:** Structured discussions on regional varieties, pronunciation differences, and code-switching practices can cultivate sociolinguistic competence. Recognizing dialects not as errors but as legitimate linguistic systems fosters inclusivity and cultural sensitivity (Hymes, 1972). Such modules are particularly relevant in heterogeneous classrooms where students bring varied linguistic backgrounds.

**Conclusion:** The evolution of Bengali language teaching reflects broader educational transformations from authority-based transmission to learner-centered engagement. Traditional methods provide structural rigor, literary depth, and cultural continuity. Modern methods promote communicative competence, inclusivity, and adaptability in a globalized world. Rather than positioning them as mutually exclusive, this study argues for an integrative framework that honors the intellectual heritage of Bengali while equipping learners for contemporary communication. Future research should include empirical classroom studies, longitudinal learner assessments, and digital pedagogy evaluation.

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