

# Cultural Sensitivity among Tamil Linguistic Minority Students

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## Abstract

*Education plays a key role in increasing cultural sensitivity by teaching students to be aware of different cultures, traditions and perspectives. To gain insight into how students from the Tamil linguistic minority group interact with and appreciate different cultures, their cultural sensitivity needs to be studied. In the pursuit of investigating the research problem, a simple random sampling technique was employed to select participants within the Kerala. The sample for the present study consisted of 200 Tamil linguistic minority students. A survey Methodology was employed, and statistical analyses, including percentages, means, standard deviations and t-tests were conducted to evaluate the hypotheses. The study reveals that Tamil linguistic minority students possess different levels of cultural sensitivity, and also that there exists significant difference in the mean scores of cultural sensitivities to gender, locale and type of management of schools. To improve cultural sensitivity among Tamil language minority students, targeted educational programmes should be implemented, intercultural interactions should be promoted and diverse perspectives should be included in the curriculum.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Sensitivity, Tamil Linguistic Minority Students.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalisation, cultural sensitivity is crucial for successful international relationships, business collaborations and diplomatic

discussions. It equips individuals to navigate a globalised world with cultural awareness. Different cultures possess unique communication styles, making cultural sensitivity

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essential for understanding and adapting to diverse preferences. According to Macdonald (1991), culture is defined as a shared collection of communication, encompassing messages, experiences, perceptions and values among a particular group of people. Cultural sensitivity plays a pivotal role in building trust and rapport, fostering stronger interpersonal relations among individuals from different backgrounds.

According to Milton Bennett (1986), it's about recognising and adapting to cultural differences, being open to different views, and wanting to learn from others. Cultural sensitivity means respecting, and understanding different beliefs and practices from various cultures. According to Haghirian (2012), understanding what defines culture is the initial step towards becoming more culturally sensitive. The widely accepted idea of culture, using the iceberg model, shows that only certain parts are seen, while much more remains hidden. Just like an iceberg where only the upper part is visible above water, culture displays only a few apparent aspects, concealing the majority below the surface. Those attuned to cultural sensitivity aim to see beyond the surface, striving to understand the concealed elements that make up the essence and majority of a culture.

Steers and Nardon (2006) defined 'cultural sensitivity' as an awareness of one's cultural

perspective and the acknowledgment of diverse cultural practices. This concept is often influenced by theories from psychology, sociology, and communication studies. Psychological perspectives, such as 'cultural empathy', underscore the importance of understanding and sharing the emotions of individuals from different cultures. Social identity theory explores how people categorise themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, a fundamental aspect of cultural sensitivity. These varied theories collectively establish the theoretical basis for cultural sensitivity, emphasising cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions crucial for navigating the complexities of diverse cultural contexts effectively.

Cultural sensitivity plays a vital role in forming inclusive and friendly communities, promoting empathy, effective communication and an appreciation for the diverse cultures that enrich our interconnected world. As per Chin and Chang (2018), in the realm of education, cultural sensitivity surpasses mere tolerance by actively embracing diversity to enrich the learning environment. For Tamil linguistic minorities, cultural sensitivity is key to their well-being, creating a feeling of belonging in social and educational settings. In educational contexts, the importance of cultural sensitivity is clear. Recognising the cultural backgrounds of Tamil speaking

minorities allows educators to establish inclusive environments that value and celebrate diversity, leading to positive learning experiences.

In schools, where students are from different cultures and learn in different ways, being culturally sensitive is important. It means teachers consider the various needs of students, making learning more inclusive. For Tamil students in Kerala who speak a minority language, it's important to be culturally sensitive to make the school environment friendly and inclusive. It helps everyone understand each other better and avoids confusion because of language or cultural differences. Also, cultural sensitivity makes communities stronger by creating a friendly environment where people respect and understand each other, working together as a team.

### **NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Understanding the cultural needs of Tamil linguistic minority students is imperative for creating an inclusive educational framework. It addresses the fundamental need for a learning environment that respects and values diverse cultural backgrounds. According to Robinson (2017), the significance of cultural sensitivity lies not only in curriculum adaptation but in empowering students to embrace their cultural identities, fostering a sense of pride and self-worth crucial for their holistic development. Language

nuances and cultural contexts play a significant role in comprehension, and expression. A culturally sensitive approach ensures that educational materials and methods consider these factors, facilitating clearer communication and reducing potential misunderstandings.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to mitigate cultural biases in education. This not only enhances the educational experience for Tamil linguistic minorities but also enriches the overall learning environment by exposing all students to a broader range of perspectives. As per Nguyen (2020), the need for cultural sensitivity in educational settings is akin to providing a universal language that bridges the gaps between diverse students, fostering an environment where every voice is heard and valued. Students exposed to culturally sensitive education are better equipped to navigate diverse social aspects, promoting empathy, understanding and collaboration.

A culturally sensitive approach fosters a positive school culture. When students see their cultural identities acknowledged and respected, it contributes to a sense of pride and self-worth. This, in turn, can lead to increased motivation, better academic performance and a more harmonious social atmosphere within the school community. The need for and significance of studying cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students extend beyond the immediate classroom

setting. It's about building a foundation for an inclusive, respectful and enriching educational experience that prepares students for a diverse and interconnected world.

### **REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES**

Chen, Chan-Olmsted and Tai (2023) investigated the relationship between cultural sensitivity and information access among ethnic groups in their research. The sample comprised individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. They employed 49 in-depth interviews as their primary tool, supplemented by thematic analysis using NVivo 12 plus for data analysis. The findings revealed that while ethnic users could identify various challenges in accessing information, they often did not fully acknowledge the influence of their cultural backgrounds on their experiences. This underscores the importance of further research and the incorporation of cultural relevance in information dissemination practices.

Thomas and Quinlan (2023) conducted a seminal study exploring the impact of cultural insensitivity in higher education curricula on student engagement. Their research, which included a racially diverse sample primarily in arts, humanities and social sciences (N = 262), led to the development of the culturally sensitive curriculum scales, filling a critical void in the literature. By employing qualitative methods, they examined students' perceptions of cultural sensitivity and its effects on

engagement. Findings highlighted significant disparities in perceptions between racially minoritised students and their white counterparts, underscoring the necessity for inclusive curricular approaches. The study revealed how cultural sensitivity dimensions mediated students' interactions with teachers and their interest in their programmes of study, emphasising the transformative potential of culturally sensitive and critical curricula in fostering student success in higher education.

Thomas (2022) studied the cultural sensitivity of curricula and its impact on student engagement in higher education. Utilising a mixed-method approach, he employed the Culturally Sensitive Curriculum Scales as the primary tool for data collection. The sample, consisting of 262 ethnically diverse students, provided insights into their perceptions of cultural sensitivity within the curriculum. The findings underscore disparities in perceptions between minority and white students, highlighting the need for more inclusive approaches. The study's emphasis on the mediating effects of cultural sensitivity on student-teacher interactions and interest which underscores the importance of fostering diverse and critical curricula to enhance engagement among minority ethnic students and potentially bridge achievement gaps.

Prakash Chandra Pradhan (2021) conducted a study on the role of cultural sensitivity in

English Language Teaching (ELT), considering it a crucial element alongside traditional language skills. The study involved an examination of cultural sensitivity's interdisciplinary complexity and its challenges in ELT implementation. It advocated for the development of appropriate curricula, methodologies and materials to effectively integrate cultural aspects into language instruction. Addressing the difficulty of teaching cultural aspects in the classroom, the study emphasised ELT's potential to liberate learners from cultural narrowness, promoting awareness and respect for diverse cultures. The findings underscored ELT's transformative power in shaping global citizens capable of embracing diverse cultural traditions worldwide.

Garcia and Pantao (2021) investigated the correlation between cultural sensitivity and classroom management in teachers. The sample consisted of 31 public school teachers in General Santos City, Philippines. Through a mixed-method approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, they found that teachers demonstrated a high level of cultural sensitivity and implemented effective classroom management techniques. The study revealed a moderate but significant relationship between cultural sensitivity and classroom management practices. These findings emphasise the importance of teachers' cultural awareness in fostering an inclusive

learning environment and highlight the necessity for training programmes to enhance educators' competency in culturally responsive teaching methods.

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### ***Cultural sensitivity***

Cultural sensitivity is the capacity to recognise, appreciate and respect the diverse beliefs, values, customs and practices of individuals or groups from various cultural backgrounds. It involves fostering open-mindedness, adapting communication styles, and accepting inclusive behaviours to navigate and appreciate cultural differences respectfully.

In the present study, the various dimensions of cultural sensitivity, such as cultural awareness, respect for cultural differences, cultural bias, adaptability, open-mindedness, communication with people from diverse backgrounds, knowledge of cultural diversity and empathy, are considered.

### ***Tamil linguistic minority students***

Linguistic minorities are groups of people whose mother tongue is different from the principal language of the state. Tamil linguistic minority students of Kerala are students whose mother tongue is Tamil, and reside in Kerala.

In the present study, Tamil linguistic minority students residing

in the Kerala and Tamil Nadu border are considered.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- To study the levels of cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students in Kerala.
- To study the differences in the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students based on gender.
- To study the differences in the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students based on locale.
- To study the differences in the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students based on type of management.

### **HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY**

- Tamil linguistic minority students possess different levels of cultural sensitivity.
- There will be no significant difference in the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students based on gender.
- There will be no significant difference in the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students based on locale.
- There will be no significant difference in the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students based on the type of management.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher utilised a simple random sampling technique to select participants for the study. The sample comprised 200 Tamil linguistic minority students in Kerala. The research employed a survey methodology to collect data.

### **TOOL USED FOR INVESTIGATION**

Investigators prepared a cultural sensitivity scale for the data collection of present study. It is 36 items scale and measures eight dimensions of cultural sensitivity— cultural awareness, respect for cultural differences, adaptability, open-mindedness, communication with people from diverse backgrounds, knowledge of cultural diversity, empathy and cultural bias. For positive statements scores 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 were given for making responses, viz., strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree, respectively. Reverse scoring procedure was adopted in the case of negative statements. After administering the tool to Tamil linguistic minority students, the responses were scored carefully and subjected to statistical analysis.

### **Statistical Techniques**

In order to find out the difference in cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students, descriptive statistics and t-test were used.

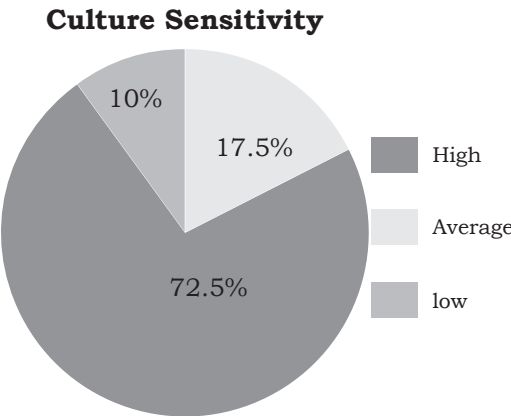
**ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

**1. To find out the different levels of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students**

Classification of Tamil linguistic minority students according to their cultural sensitivity is given in Table 1. The table also contains the number and percentage of Tamil linguistic minority students with different levels of cultural sensitivity.

**Table 1**  
**Data and results of cultural sensitivity for the total sample**

Variable	Category	Sample Size	Percentage
Cultural Sensitivity	High	35	17.5
	Average	145	72.5
	Low	20	10



*Fig. 1: Pie chart showing percentage of different levels of cultural sensitivity*

The analysis of the data presented in the Figure 1 reveals notable trends in the cultural sensitivity levels among Tamil linguistic minority students in Kerala. Notably, 17.5 per cent of these students demonstrate a high level of cultural sensitivity, characterised by their profound understanding of cultural traditions, adept communication across various cultural contexts and a strong commitment to respecting diversity. Conversely, 10 per cent exhibit a low level of cultural sensitivity, displaying limited awareness of cultural diversity and behaviours indicative of insensitivity. However, the majority, constituting 72.5 per cent of the students, fall into the average category, indicating some awareness and respect for cultural differences, albeit with potential challenges or gaps in understanding. Overall, the majority of students fall into the average category of cultural sensitivity. Therefore, the study suggests a need for improving cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students in Kerala.

**2. To find out the significance difference in cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect gender**

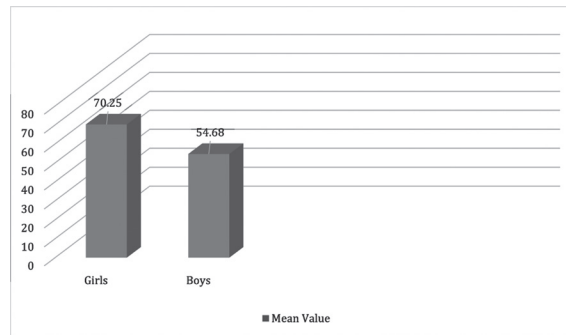
As shown in Table 2, significant difference was found between the mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect to gender.

**Table 2**

**The data and results of the test show the significance of the difference between the mean scores of cultural sensitivity among boys and girls students of Tamil linguistic minority students**

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Result
<b>Girls</b>	108	70.25	7.55	6.72	Difference**
<b>Boys</b>	92	54.68	6.83		

\*\*Significant at 0.05 level of significance.



*Fig. 2: Bar graph showing difference between mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic students with respect to gender*

The mean scores of the cultural sensitivity of girls and boys are 70.25 and 54.68, and standard deviations are 7.55 and 6.83, respectively. It is clear from Figure 2 that girls have a higher cultural sensitivity than boys. When the cultural sensitivity of boys and girls students of Tamil linguistic minority is compared the t-value obtained is 6.72. Since the t-value is greater than the table value at 0.05 level of significance, mean difference between boys and girls students of Tamil linguistic minority was found

to be significant. So, the alternative hypothesis is rejected.

## **2.2 To find out the significance difference in cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect to locale**

As shown in Table 3, significant difference was found between the mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect to locale. The mean scores of the cultural sensitivity of rural and urban areas are 69.89 and 79.53, and standard deviations are 7.54 and 8.35, respectively. It

Table 3

The data and results of the test show the significance of difference between the mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect to locale

Locale	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Result
Urban	88	79.53	8.35	4.28	Difference**
Rural	112	69.89	7.54		

\*\*Significant at 0.05 level of significance.

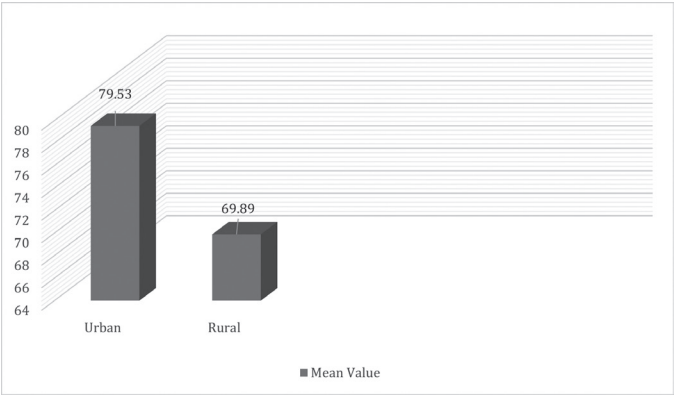


Fig. 3: Bar graph showing difference between mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic students with respect to locale

is clear from Figure 3 that urban students have a higher cultural sensitivity than rural students. When the cultural sensitivity of rural and urban students of Tamil linguistic minority is compared, the t-value obtained is 4.28. Since, the t-value is greater than the table value at 0.05 level of significance, mean difference between rural and urban students of Tamil linguistic minority was found to be significant. So, the alternative hypothesis is rejected.

**2.3 To find out the significance difference in cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect to the type of management**

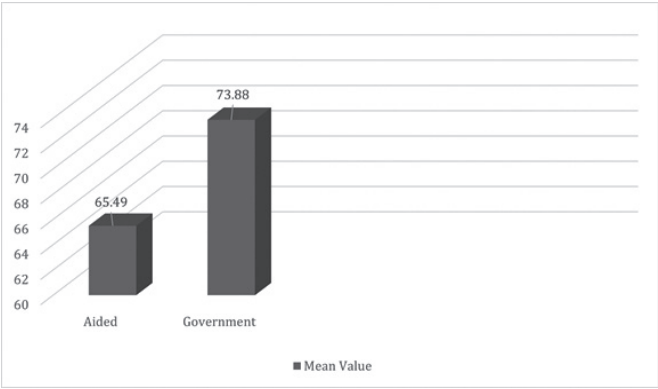
As shown in Table 4, significant difference was found between the mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect to the type of management. The mean scores of the cultural sensitivity of government and aided are 73.88 and 65.49,

**Table 4**

**The data and results of the test show the significance of difference between the mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students with respect to the type of management**

Type of Management	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Result
Aided	90	65.49	8.78	3.52	Difference**
Government	110	73.88	9.53		

*\*\*Significant at 0.05 level of significance.*



*Fig. 4: Bar graph showing difference between mean scores of cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic students with respect to type of management*

and standard deviations are 9.53 and 8.78, respectively. It is clear from Figure 4 that government school students have a higher cultural sensitivity than aided school students. When the cultural sensitivity of government and Aided school students of Tamil linguistic minority is compared, the t-value obtained is 3.52. Since the t-value is greater than the table value at 0.05 level of significance, mean difference

between government and aided school students of Tamil linguistic minority was found to be significant. So, the alternative hypothesis is rejected.

**MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

- Tamil linguistic minority students possess different levels of cultural sensitivity. The result shows that most of the students have an average level of cultural sensitivity.

- The cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority girls is higher than boys within the same linguistic minority.
- Cultural sensitivity of urban Tamil linguistic minority students is higher than rural students within the same linguistic minority.
- Cultural sensitivity of government school Tamil linguistic minority students is higher than aided school students within the same linguistic minority.

### **Educational Implications**

Educational implications encompass a range of actions and considerations aimed at fostering a culturally sensitive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers play a pivotal role in this endeavour by integrating students' diverse cultural backgrounds into lesson plans and providing language support to facilitate full participation. They should cultivate a classroom atmosphere that values cultural diversity, encouraging open discussions to promote understanding among students. Seeking professional development opportunities to enhance cultural competence and implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies are essential for addressing the needs of students from various backgrounds. Curriculum makers must ensure that educational materials reflect the cultural diversity of students, while policy administrators should formulate inclusive policies and allocate

resources to support initiatives promoting cultural sensitivity within educational institutions. Additionally, parents play a crucial role by actively engaging in school activities, fostering open communication with their children about school experiences, and creating a supportive space for discussing concerns related to cultural sensitivity. Schools should establish culturally inclusive environments, facilitate cultural exchange programmes or events and collaborate with community leaders to bridge gaps between cultural expectations and educational practices, thereby, fostering a harmonious and culturally sensitive learning environment.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study reveal notable disparities in the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students based on gender, locale and school management. Firstly, Tamil linguistic minority girls exhibited higher levels of cultural sensitivity compared to boys. This difference may be attributed to various socio-cultural factors, including traditional gender roles and the educational experiences that girls and boys undergo within the Tamil linguistic minority community. Girls may receive more encouragement to value empathy, relationships and cultural understanding, which contributes to their heightened cultural sensitivity. Additionally, schools may play a role in exposing girls to diverse perspectives

and cultural stories, further enhancing their cultural awareness.

The study highlights significant distinctions in cultural sensitivity based on the students' locale. Urban Tamil linguistic minority students demonstrated greater cultural sensitivity than their rural counterparts. This disparity can be attributed to the increased opportunities for interaction with diverse cultures, participation in cultural events and access to educational resources available in urban settings. Urban schools often cover a broader range of cultural subjects and expose students to various perspectives, fostering an open-minded approach towards cultural diversity. Urban areas offer diverse cultural experiences, including museums and cultural centres, enriching the cultural sensitivity of urban Tamil linguistic minority students.

The type of school management also influences cultural sensitivity levels among Tamil linguistic minority students. Government schools tend to foster higher cultural sensitivity compared to aided schools. The diverse student population in government schools exposes students to a wide array of cultural perspectives, promoting greater interaction and understanding among students from different linguistic minorities. Additionally, government schools often prioritise cultural awareness

in their curriculum, incorporating a broader range of cultural topics and experiences, which contributes to the observed higher cultural sensitivity among students. The inclusive environment of government schools encourages students to embrace cultural diversity, fostering empathy and respect for different cultural backgrounds among Tamil linguistic minority students.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the disparities in cultural sensitivity among Tamil linguistic minority students in Palakkad district based on gender, locale and school management. It underscores the importance of addressing these disparities to create a more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environment. By implementing tailored techniques, educational strategies and effective curriculum designs, educational institutions can work towards enhancing the cultural sensitivity of Tamil linguistic minority students. This study contributes to the field by providing insights into the factors influencing cultural sensitivity and highlighting the need for targeted interventions to promote cultural understanding and appreciation among students from diverse backgrounds. Ultimately, fostering cultural sensitivity among students not only enhances their educational experiences but also promotes social cohesion and harmony within the broader community.

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