

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AS LINGUISTIC CAPITAL AMONG BANGLADESHI GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

English language proficiency is considered an essential tool for Bangladeshi graduates to use in various aspects such as ensuring job security, attaining higher education, securing international business, using social networking, and communicating with friends and families. English language proficiency in personal development relates to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital in language learning and practice among Bangladeshi graduates. This study aimed to identify how graduates use English language as linguistic capital in the Bangladeshi context. This qualitative research utilised a phenomenological research design and thematic analysis. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data through face-to-face interviews involving 20 Bangladeshi graduates in the capital city Dhaka. The results indicate that English language proficiency is used as linguistic capital, which converts into economic capital in developing a career, earning money, and gaining prestige in communication. This study contributes to promoting an awareness among graduates to use English as linguistic capital in individual and national development.

Keywords: English language proficiency; cultural capital; graduates; Bangladesh

Introduction

The language learning phenomenon among Bangladeshi graduates shows that English language proficiency is useful in employment, higher education, local and international business, technology, social media and prestigious communication among friends and families as expressed via Bourdieu's (2018) concept of linguistic capital (Islam et al., 2022a; Rahman & Singh, 2020). Moreover, English language

proficiency is considered an essential additional qualification to secure jobs in Bangladesh, especially in the private sector (Imam, 2005). The English language-dominated phenomenon influences graduates' career development, which in turn is contingent on graduates' socioeconomic background, social status, friends, families, and overall surroundings (Islam et al., 2022a). However, English language proficiency hardly provides equal opportunities to graduates in wealthy, middle and working classes (Islam et al., 2022a). Various studies have been conducted on how people use English as linguistic capital worldwide, but studies have yet to be conducted in the Bangladeshi context (Hamid et al., 2009; Erling et al., 2012; Islam et al., 2022a; Islam et al., 2024). Therefore, this study would fill the research gap and contribute to creating awareness among graduates of Bangladesh to perceive the economic benefits of linguistic capital.

Linguistic Background of Bangladesh

English language has been used in the Bangladeshi society since the British colonial period when India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were administered together under British rule (Hamid & Erling, 2016). The wealthy class of that period used the language to communicate with the British people since English was the language of the wealthy class in the Indian subcontinent (Imam, 2005). However, the scenario changed after the British left the continent, and Bangladesh subsequently became independent from India and Pakistan in 1971; with political changes came linguistic changes as the economy of modern Bangladesh developed (Rahman et al., 2010). English language spread and was enhanced due to the internationalisation of neoliberal economy and globalisation, all while Bangladeshi graduates are part of this scenario (Piller & Cho, 2013). Hence, to conduct international trade, English is highly in demand as Bangladesh secures international business with exports of ready-made garments and human resources around the world. Consequently, people learn English and speak it daily to accommodate the current trend. However, due to the growth of English-medium education, only some urban, rich families use English in personal conversations (Islam et al., 2022a). In contrast, the semi-urban, rural living, middle- and lower-class graduates seldom use English to converse with their friends and family (Mohanlal & Sharada, 2004).

Linguistic Diversities among the Social Classes

Based on the socioeconomic patterns of Bangladesh, the graduates are segmented into lower, middle and wealthy classes with linguistic diversities observed among the groups, where the wealthy-class graduates' use of English differ from the middle and lower class (Islam et al., 2022a; Imam, 2005).

First, the wealthy class graduates have solid economic backgrounds and social values, which assist them in securing a superior status in society as they also have connections in developed countries around the world, especially in western countries (Bhuiyan, 2011). This group of graduates often conducts international business and relations overseas, which would require English language proficiency; consequently, most graduates study in English-speaking institutions either at home or abroad (Pinon

& Haydon, 2010). Moreover, they use English as the language of communication among friends and families to maintain social prestige and status; thus, it becomes a prestigious language to the wealthy class (Islam et al., 2022a).

Second, middle-class graduates maintain a good connection with both the rich and lower-class members of the society (Hamid et al., 2009). The middle class mixes English and local languages in communication to showcase their ability and prestige of having an English medium education, although their economic power may reflect otherwise (Haidar, 2017). The middle class uses English language as linguistic capital to develop better careers and earnings that support Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital concept of language use in society (Hamid et al., 2009). Next, working-class graduates experience economic instability due to various factors, so they focus on living to survive economic struggles, resulting in their dependence on the middle and wealthy class of graduates to overcome their financial issues (Islam et al., 2022a). The working class graduates use English language to accommodate middle and upper-class people, albeit infrequently, which also reflected the linguistic capital possess by them (Jahan & Hamid, 2019).

English Language Use in Career Enhancement

English language is considered as an essential tool for success in career advancement for Bangladeshi graduates due to globalisation and the influence of neoliberal economy (Islam et al., 2022b). Job vacancies advertised by many private organisations require applicants to have good proficiency in the English language (Karim et al., 2021). Multinational companies have been found to recruit few candidates with poor English skills (Salahuddin et al., 2013). Employees would find it difficult to obtain a promotion with low English language proficiency in the workplace (Khan & Chaudhury, 2012). Consequently, the graduates have focused their efforts on learning English. As an entrepreneur, graduates require English language proficiency to succeed internationally. In Bangladesh, the garments export industry offers enormous employment opportunities to graduates where people proficient in the English language have more options and opportunities to succeed, resulting in vast numbers of English learning centres mushrooming around the country and the English language teachers benefiting economically (Islam, 2018).

English Language Use in Social-media for Earning

Social media has increasingly influenced people's lifestyles and languages in recent decades (Islam et al., 2020). Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram use English as the common language (Haque, 2017). Hence, the English language becomes the dominant lingua franca in spreading information quickly around the globe. Bangladeshi graduates use this social media platform to teach and learn English extensively and easily (Biswas et al., 2020). Hundreds of online English teaching platforms are available in Bangladesh, which have largely started since the COVID-19 pandemic (Afrin, 2020). The teaching and learning of English language through social media in Bangladesh brings economic benefits. English language proficiency is seen as linguistic capital used to earn money through lessons

which are conducted via social media (Hamid, 2016; Sultana, 2014). On the other hand, there are still vast numbers of brick-and-mortar coaching centres around Bangladesh, including the British Council.

Theory

This study anchors itself on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in society, particularly the ability to understand and use "educated" language. The possession of culture varies with social class, yet the education system assumes the possession of cultural capital (Sullivan, 2000). As Bourdieu puts it: "The same academic qualifications receive very variable values and functions according to economic and social capital (particularly the capital of relationship inherited from the family) which those who hold these qualifications have at their disposal" (Bourdieu et al., 1977, p. 506). According to Blackledge (2001), speaking English, feeling comfortable approaching a teacher, reading and writing in English, or reading a story at bedtime are measures of what Bourdieu (1986) called cultural capital. It refers to middle-class people's knowledge, attitudes, values, language (speaking correctly and nicely is a form of linguistic capital), tastes and abilities. Cultural capital is not necessarily about money but can be exchanged for money. Cultural capital is "the instrument for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986, p. 73). Due to colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism, migration and immigration, the English language became a powerful tool for personal development and advancement. The language has come to be seen as a cultural capital which can be exchanged for better job opportunities, prestige, progress, and modernity (Malik & Mohamed, 2014). In these circumstances, five research questions were posed to explore how Bangladeshi graduates use English as linguistic capital in higher education, international business, social network-based income, career advancements, and prestigious language in conversations.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative, phenomenological research design that seeks to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon in sociolinguistic experiences. The research investigates everyday experiences of human beings in order to gain deeper insights into how people understand those experiences.

Purposive sampling technique was used to collect the data through face-to-face seating interviews with 20 male and female Bangladeshi graduates. The Bangladeshi capital city of Dhaka was selected as a research location due to the high density of graduates and educational institutions. Many graduates migrate to the city for higher education and better job opportunities. Table 1 presents the demographic background of 20 respondents.

Table 1
Demographic Background of Respondents (N=20)

Respondents	Numbers
Education	
Bachelor	10
Master	10
Designation	
Teacher	7
Student	3
Banker	2
Housewife	2
Business	2
Unemployed	1
Self-employed	1
Quality assurance officer	1
Merchandiser	1
Sex	
Male	11
Female	9

Open-ended interview questions were used to collect data for individual interviews and focus group discussions. Comments and suggestions were later sought from experts from the same field to ensure the validity and reliability of the interview questions. Before the interview and discussion began, the respondents were briefed on the purposes of data collection and they were given assurances on the confidentiality of the study. The researcher also explained data accessibility and ownership to the respondents. Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees to ensure anonymity. The researcher repeated the interviews and discussions until the data gleaned achieved saturation at the 20th interview. The interviews were recorded for transcription, translation and analysis.

The recordings were listened to by the researcher many times for transcription and translation. Subsequently, the translated data were analysed manually by the researcher. Thematic analysis was applied to the data by having the keywords and phrases in the minor categories to form a long list of codes, which were compiled to answer the research questions. Next, some of the codes from the minor categories box list were collapsed into major categories. Finally, the themes were produced from the major categories. It was found that many important codes have been selected to support the themes related to the theory. The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the University of Malaya and approved by the Ethics Committee of the university.

Findings

The findings are presented in five specific sections according to the research questions to ensure the use of English language as linguistic capital reflects Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital concepts in language learning and practice among Bangladeshi graduates. Each of these sections would focus on higher education, international business, social networks, career developments, and communication among friends and families respectively.

English as Linguistic Capital in Higher Education

The first research question is on how English is used as linguistic capital in higher education. Respondent B claimed that he has been learning English for the last six months in a coaching centre to improve his English language proficiency because of his interest in going overseas for higher education. He had to pay 20000 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) for his English language course fees. The good amount of money he paid as fees is a way of exchanging money into linguistic capital. The respondent also opined that the BDT 20000 is his investment; via this investment, he will earn more than that in the future.

I aim to study abroad, so I have been learning English in a coaching centre for the last six months, but before this, I also learned English as spoken English in another coaching centre. I am a slow learner, so it is taking more time, but I am hopeful I will be successful. I have paid BDT20000 as fees which is an immense amount, but in future, I will be able to earn more than my investment. (Respondent B)

Similarly, respondent F has completed a master's degree in English language and literature, then works as an English language teacher in a college and at the same time works as a part-time language instructor in a coaching centre. He is well paid in the coaching centre too. He also thinks that English speaking ability is his only capital for earning money. His higher education in the English language helped him as linguistic capital to survive.

I am a poor economic background graduate from a rural area, but I managed to get higher education (Hons and Master in English language and literature) from the national university of Bangladesh. My English language proficiency is the only capital I use to earn money, and I teach English at the college and coaching centre, where I get enough salary to manage my family's expenditures. (Respondent F)

Both respondents, B and F claim that English language is highly required for higher education, so respondent B has been learning English for the last six months, while respondent F uses English as linguistic capital to earn an income.

English as Linguistic Capital in International Business

This section presents the findings of the second research question, which aimed to find how English language is used as linguistic capital in international business. Respondent D stated that he is an owner of a broker house (broker house is a third-party organisation that deals with buying and selling garments abroad between garment factories and foreign buyers). Due to the nature of his work, he must possess good communication skills in English to gain good profit. Based on his statement, the English language is the linguistic capital.

I joined as an assistant merchandiser in a broker house after graduation and post-graduation in business studies, where I had experience and gained business policy. I started my own business. English language proficiency helped me a lot to succeed in my job and business. Good English makes it easier to understand the buyer and satisfy them. (Respondent D)

Another respondent, J, stated that he works in a private organisation as a broker. Export of human resources is the second largest source of income for the Bangladeshi government, where English language is a crucial part of communication in this business. If the candidates are good in the language, they can secure good income and positions in foreign countries. Besides, as he works as a broker to export talents abroad, he has to be a good speaker of English. It is largely impossible to handle a business without a good proficiency in English language.

Due to the nature of the business, I have to handle the foreigners buying the garments, and I have managed to talk in English. Although I could improve at English, I can work better. Besides, it is easy to handle foreigners with good English. (Respondent J)

The respondents claim that all international businesses require English language proficiency for communication and further growth. So, English language skills is pivotal for a person to succeed in international business.

English as a Linguistic Capital in Social Networks for Income

The third research question is on how English is used as a linguistic capital in social networks for income. Respondent M described that she is teaching English to a good number of students online, which is more than the number that can fit in a physical class. Besides, she writes blogs and has a YouTube account and a Facebook page to teach English. This way, she earns smart money, where English language works as linguistic capital.

During and after the Covid-19 crisis, I have largely conducted online English language teaching, which is better than physical classes because I have more students than before. Now, I earn better than before through English language teaching online. (Respondent M)

Similarly, respondent G is used to online teaching and learning because the physical class is time-consuming and requires transportation costs. She can save money and pay for online courses. She is preparing to sit for the IELTS online with two instructors to get good test scores. Moreover, she subscribes to several online platforms to learn English.

I am interested in getting higher education abroad, so I am preparing for my IELTS score. I prefer online social media-based English learning procedures because it is cheap and easily accessible, and time-saving. Moreover, I am a subscriber to several online English language teaching platforms. (Respondent G)

At the present moment, online teaching platforms in Bangladesh are gaining popularity due to their features and the current trends in learning. Social media-based English language teaching in Bangladesh is also becoming more popular due to its easy accessibility from any corner of the world.

English as a Linguistic Capital in Career Advancements

The fourth research question is on how English is used as linguistic capital in career advancement. Respondent C explained that she works in a Korean-owned garment factory where she needs English to communicate with Korean officers on specific issues. The Bangladeshi garment industry is the top employment provider where many posts require proficiency in English language so as to assist them to be empowered in social settings. English language proficiency enhances career advancement, especially in securing jobs at private companies, both local and multinational corporations.

I have been working in this factory for the last seven years as Quality Assurance Manager so, I have to talk to high-level officers and sometimes I have to participate in training session with foreigners where I need the English language to understand the discussion in the training session. Without English skills, it was not possible. (Respondent- C)

Similarly, one of the respondents, H, claims that he has just completed a Master's in English language and literature from a private university and is looking for jobs, particularly public administrative jobs. In the meantime, he works as an English language tutor. He gives tuition to several students in individual students' houses and earns handsome amounts, which he spends and saves for his parents and himself.

I have just completed a Master's in the English language and am looking for jobs. My first choice is public administrative jobs. Before having the job, I currently give home tuition service. I have several students; I go to the individual students' houses and teach them English subjects. English language skills help me to find jobs and conduct tuition services. (Respondent- H)

According to respondent H, English language proficiency is a form of linguistic capital to him because it helps him to earn money and to support his parents and

family economically. He is rather confident that language proficiency will eventually allow him to secure a public administrative job. From this point of view, English is considered as linguistic capital that can be exchanged for money.

English as a Prestigious Language in Conversations

The fifth research question investigates how English is used as a linguistic capital in a prestigious language in conversations, so this segment of findings presents English language proficiency not only as linguistic capital, but also as a language coveted in conversations with friends and family members. In the interview with respondent A, he stated that he teaches two students who are studying in a renowned English medium school in the capital city. This suggests that English language is perceived to be a prestigious language as their parents worked as high-ranked administrative government officers and are used to speaking English to their children as speaking in the language projects a sense of prestige in the community. Moreover, their parents think that if they speak Bengali to the children, they will lose their fluency in English, and the school does not allow them to speak Bengali.

I have completed a Master's in Mathematics and worked as a house tutor, so I teach two students who study in a renowned English medium school. I teach Maths in English medium because they don't understand Bengali clearly because their parents do not allow them to speak Bengali. Once, I asked the parents why they never talk in Bengali, and they answered that if they speak in Bengali, the children will lose the flow of English speaking; besides, English is a prestigious language. (Respondent- A)

Similarly, respondent O shared regular conversation experiences among their friends. They are three friends who live in the same area but attend different universities. The respondent's friend studies at a top-ranking private university while the respondent and another of his friends are at a national university. When they meet and gossip, the friend who studies at a private university uses too much English in speaking and the other two friends also try to speak in English but they do not speak as much as him in the language.

We are three friends who live in the same area in the capital city, but we two study at the National University while another friend studies at a top-ranking private university; he uses too much English in speaking, and we try to adjust him. Maybe it is his habitual fact, or he speaks English as a prestige. (Respondent- O)

According to the respondents' statements, there are families in Bangladesh that use English in daily conversations as they see the language as prestigious and they have an affection for the language. Moreover, among casual friend circles, they are Bangladeshis who have developed a habit of conversing in English language possibly due to the influence of their environment.

Discussion

The findings present the English language as an essential tool to pursue higher education. As a result, many students who were taught using Bengali as a medium of instruction enrolled themselves in English coaching centres in order to obtain the required score needed to secure placements in universities. An English language coaching centre earns a considerable amount of money by essentially exchanging linguistic capital into money (Hamid et al., 2009). The coaching centre offers various programmes for the student, such as oral English, basic grammar, IELTS preparation, English certificate courses, university admission, and English for occupations in Bangladesh. English language is sold as a product to customers at high prices (Ali & Hamid, 2020). The students also have to fulfil the given requirements from universities for higher education and employers for job recruitment. Higher education is only possible with English language proficiency, resulting in the graduates having to gain good scores in English standardised tests before commencing the main courses at the university level (Berger et al., 2018). Hence, the candidates must go to coaching centres to improve their English language proficiency to pursue higher education (Janum, 2021). Mutual benefits exist: the candidate benefits from higher education, while the coaching centre owners and teachers benefit economically. Through these programmes, students would acquire linguistic capital in which they will be able to use it in the future.

English is an indispensable language for communicating and conducting international business successfully. Private companies have to adjust to foreign countries' demand, neoliberal economic pressure, and English language-based technology so they recruit skilled workers who are proficient in English (Park et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the findings indicate that many multinational companies in Bangladesh are not able to frequently satisfy this demand. In the era of globalisation, many graduates engage in international business in Bangladesh, particularly in the ready-made garment industry of Bangladesh, which exports a vast number of garments around the world.

In the 21st century, a country can hardly survive alone, so countries rely on international trade, which is carried out mostly by using the English language (Hu & McKay, 2012). Hence, a country would be in the advantage if it could supply skilled people conversant in English to conduct trades. Subsequently, to fulfil the demand for English language proficiency, schools, colleges, universities, coaching centres, and private house tutors sell English as linguistic capital all in the name of assisting to produce graduates to become proficient in English (Islam et al., 2022b).

Globalisation gained traction and speed via electronics and social media, as any news, events, or incidents can be disseminated around the world in a single minute, and English is the major language used in the process. (Rantanen, 2005). Similarly, social media is also used as a platform to teach English language worldwide; people can engage the service of native English language teachers quickly through this platform (Alharthi et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, English language teachers made full use of the social networks in teaching English (Jahan & Ahmed, 2012). These social media-based generations have considerable opportunities to earn money through teaching the English language. So, English as linguistic capital easily converts into

economic prosperity through social media (Bourdieu, 2018). During the COVID-19 crisis, online teaching and learning practices have improved tremendously around the world. Correspondingly, Bangladeshi graduates also joined the bandwagon on the online teaching and learning process, utilising learner-friendly social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram. There are hundreds of online English language teaching platforms available in Bangladesh.

English language proficiency enhances career development in various ways. Bangladeshis who possess a good command of the English language enjoy more opportunities to secure positions and promotions in the workplace (Islam et al., 2022b). Besides, most job advertisements mention that proficiency in English is preferred, and many job interviews are conducted in English. Conversely, people who are proficient in English can quickly secure jobs, which indicates that the candidates have acquired the proper value of linguistic capital (Erling et al., 2012). The finding of this study also demonstrates that graduates will be able to receive a promotion in the workplace due to their English language skills.

Lastly, English is also perceived as a prestigious language of communication among Bangladeshi graduates, whether with friends or families (Islam et al., 2022a). The deliberate use of English language among Bangladeshi graduates can be explained through cultural factors such as globalisation, internationalisation, and influence of the English as a medium of instruction (Sultana, 2014). An outset arises among the parents and graduates that the English language adds social prestige and values in building a better career and social recognition (Imam, 2005). Conversations in family and social circles are found to be mainly in the native language, Bangla, except for some differences in urban elite class who uses English with children to maintain their social status and adjust to the English medium of instruction in educational institutions (Islam et al., 2022a). Similarly, middle and affluent graduates use the English language with friends and families, which in turn will pass down a part of cultural capital or linguistic capital to the next generation.

Conclusion

The study aimed to identify how graduates use English language as linguistic capital in the Bangladeshi context. The research was conducted using a qualitative, phenomenological research design and thematic analysis, where the purposive sampling technique was used for sampling, and face-to-face interviews were conducted to find the results. The results indicate that English language proficiency is linguistic capital for Bangladeshi graduates to access job security, higher education, international business, income via social networks, and prestigious communication with friends and families. Moreover, the present findings also present the dimensional use of English as linguistic capital among Bangladeshi social settings which carry social and cultural diversity among the graduates. Hence, this study suggests creating awareness on the necessity of using English language in daily life with the balanced use of local languages. Nevertheless, this study is limited to covering Islamic-based graduates from a Madrasah background. Further research should be conducted on the impact of the English language as a form of linguistic capital beyond the Islamic education-based graduates in Bangladesh.

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