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The Legacy of English in Private Universities in Bangladesh: Socio-Cultural, Economic, and Psychological Influences

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the reasons behind preferring English in private universities in Bangladesh and tries to determine why the colonial legacy of preference for English in Bangladesh continues to grow on such a large scale. Despite Bangladesh being a predominantly monolingual country, English continues to play a significant role in its educational system. In all areas of the state, English remains the preferred language in various sectors, despite efforts by educational and governmental bodies to promote Bangla across all areas of life. This study aims to demonstrate the hidden motivations and reasons behind learning English. It adopts a survey method and collects data through a questionnaire. It follows a simple random sampling technique to gather data from 160 undergraduate students from 4 private universities located in Rajshahi and Khulna. The findings indicate that students prefer English in all types of communications because they think that English opens multiple employment opportunities and widens scopes for bright careers. They also feel complacent and superior in their ability to speak in English. These factors are deeply mixed with the colonial impacts and legacies and are mainly claimed to be the reasons of preference for English in private universities in Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, the English language has had several ups and downs in the context of position (Banu & Sussex, 2001; Maniruzzaman, 2009; Rahman, 2005). After the War of Liberation, English, once the second most popular language in Bangladesh, was overshadowed by the rise of Bangla as the sole national language, driven by strong national sentiment. Earlier, the language movement of 1952 fostered national and political awareness, leading to efforts to replace English with Bangla. However, due to globalization, English has emerged as the dominant global language of communication. Bangladesh, due to global technology and trade, is heavily influenced by English. English is currently the second most significant language in Bangladesh, often even more so than Bangla. Since it is viewed as a means of both individual and societal growth, it has elevated in the education sector (Erling et al., 2012). The English language is now a ubiquitous presence in every aspect of Bangladeshi society. Except for M. Phil. and Ph. D. degrees, the majority of private universities in Bangladesh currently prefer English as the medium of instruction and offer higher education in a wide range of highly technical and general subjects and students must meet specific English proficiency requirements in order to study in these disciplines. These days, one of the main requirements for obtaining a good job in Bangladesh is English proficiency. Candidates with excellent English language skills are preferred by banks, government agencies, national and international corporations and private sectors. As a result, students are keen to improve their written and spoken English proficiency. In addition, the private universities ensure the supply of academic materials as well as holding their sessions in English. English language proficiency is usually linked to increased social standing and cultural capital. The choice for English medium education is reinforced by the forward-thinking and cosmopolitan families who place a high value on their children's English education. For this reason, families invest money on English education for their children in order to guarantee social mobility and better chances in the future.

Objectives of this Study

The objectives that this study intends to fulfill are:

- to explore the reasons behind preferring English to Bangla in private universities in Bangladesh.
- to determine why the colonial legacy of preference for the English language in Bangladesh still continues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rahman (2005) conducted a study titled "Orientations and Motivation in English Language Learning: A Study of Bangladeshi Students at Undergraduate Level". This study examines the diverse socio-psychological perspectives that Bangladeshi undergraduate students at private universities have towards their English language learning. Ninety-four students from the American International University, Bangladesh (AIUB) were chosen at random for the study. The study's conclusions demonstrate that students concentrate on English

because of its “functional role” – that is, its practical significance. Additionally, the analysis shows that the learners acquire English for “instrumental” purposes.

As per Moivaziri’s (2009) research, language learners are motivated by both instrumental and social factors at the same time. The study conducted at Islamic Azad University in Iran by Chalak and Kassaian (2010) shows that EFL students typically have a highly positive attitude toward the target language and frequently acquire English for both practical and integrative goals. Similar findings were found in a study done by Goktepe (2014) at a Turkish university, which demonstrated that students’ motivations for learning English are both instinctual and practical.

In the study, “The Trend of Using English in Bangladeshi Social and Electronic Media Conversations: Reasons ‘Within’ and ‘Beyond’ the Circle,” Shanta (2017) explored the realities of language shifts and how they affect Bangla. The study examines some exchanges from Facebook pages, private radio and TV channels, and other sources to illustrate the state of Bangla language in Bangladeshi electronic and social media today. It illustrates several exchanges in which English is used more than Bangla. The researcher argues that it happens as a result of learners’ favorable attitudes toward English and indifference to Bangla.

In a research titled “Problematizing the Popular Discourses about Language and Identity of Young Adults in Bangladesh,” Sultana (2012) critically assesses the role of English and other languages in Bangladesh, particularly in the lives of young generation. She claims that the younger generations are unable to preserve the integrity of Bangladeshi culture and identity since they are engulfed by Western culture.

The study carried out by Hossain (2013) seeks to find out how the English language affects the way of life of Bangladeshi tertiary students. It provides a justification for the use of the English language as a weapon of dominance and power. The findings of this study indicate that the learners relate the English speaking ability with social prestige.

The focus of Moquit’s (2014) study, “Code-switching and Code-mixing between Bangla and English: Undergraduate Private University Students,” is on undergraduate students at private universities in Bangladesh who engage in these activities in casual settings. It examines the reasons behind different types of code-switching and code-mixing among the students of private universities. The findings expose that the learners “show off” their status by using English words, phrases, and sentences. They claim that speaking English gives them a sense of social status and competence.

Taking the above discussion into consideration, the researchers of this work think that how the legacy of English in private universities in Bangladesh continues needs to be addressed academically. In doing so, this study adopts Phillipson’s

(1992) theory of linguistic and cultural imperialism. In this theory, he claims that “English has been cleverly promoted around the world by the British and American agencies with the sole intention of increased profit and continued domination of third world countries (Basu, 2013, p. 185)”. Likewise, Pennycook (1995) asserts that English discourse, whether written or spoken, establishes the superior image of native speakers in the periphery.

METHODOLOGY

Method and Procedure

As the nature of this study is quantitative, it follows the survey method. Primary data are gathered from the participants through a questionnaire. A closed-ended five-point Likert scale is used in the questionnaire for data collection. After collecting the data, closed-ended questions are interpreted and analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The results are presented in tables and charts. To measure the reliability of the findings, this study adopts the mean rating scale used by Talib (1996).

1.00-1.80= Very Low

1.81-2.60= Low

2.61-3.40= Moderate

3.41-4.20= High

4.20-5.00= Very High

Sampling and Context of the Study

A total of 160 students participated in the survey of this study. The respondents were selected following simple random sampling technique from different departments of four private universities: Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna (NUBTK) and North Western University (NWU) from Khulna; Varendra University (VU) and North Bengal International University (NBIU) from Rajshahi. These universities represent two major geographical areas or cities (Rajshahi and Khulna) of Bangladesh, and students from different localities and socio-economic backgrounds come to attend these institutions.

Table 1

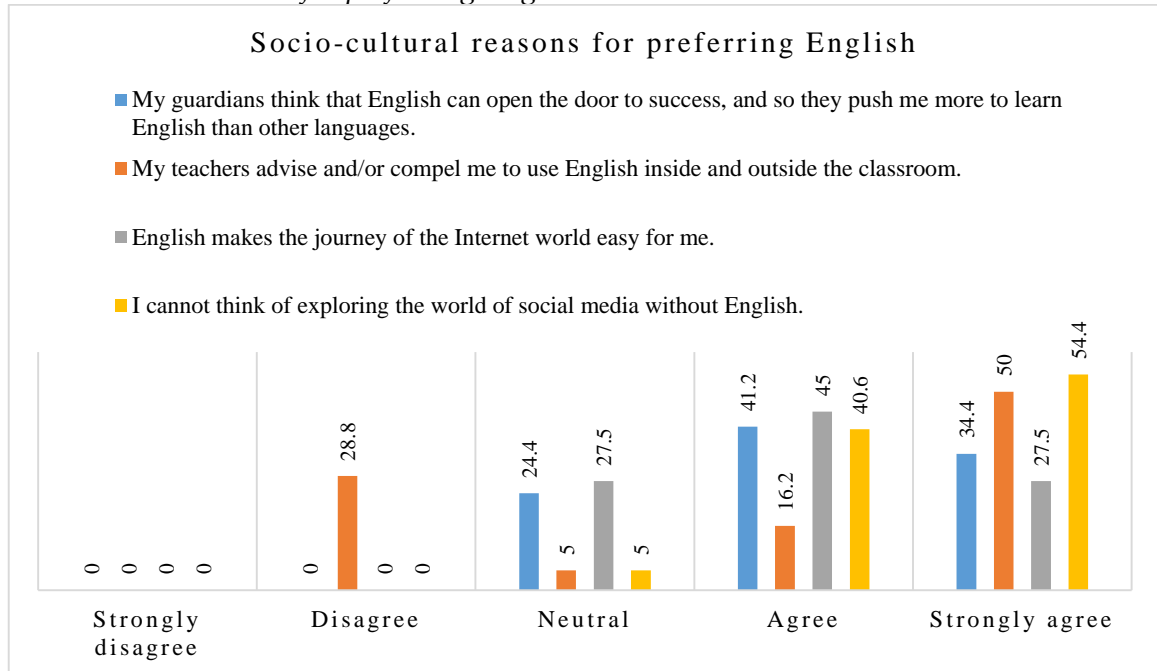
Participant details

Name of Institution		NUBTK	NWU	VU	NBIU
Gender	Male	16	21	24	26
	Female	24	19	16	14
Total		40	40	40	40
Grand Total		160			

Data Analysis and Results

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) is used to analyze and interpret the data in the order that they appear in the questionnaires. The responses are shown in percentage through figures.

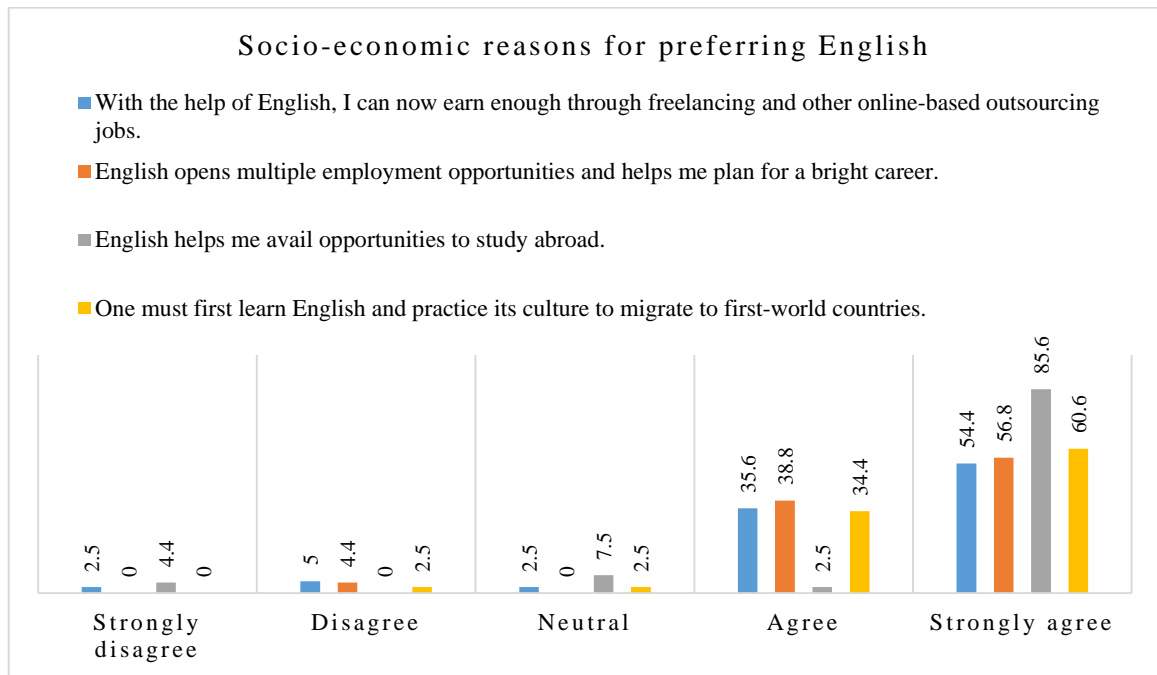
Figure 1
Socio-cultural reasons for preferring English



The data in figure 1 demonstrate that a significant portion of respondents, more than 1/3 population, strongly agree with the idea that their guardians believe English proficiency to be instrumental in achieving success, therefore encourage them to give priority in learning English over other languages. This notion is additionally endorsed by another 50% (approximately) of the participants, which highlights the strong influence of guardians in promoting English. Moreover, near-about 2 out of 3 respondents acknowledge that teachers promote the maximum utilization of English within and beyond the confines of the academic environment.

Furthermore, close to 75% of the respondents confess that English simplifies navigating the Internet, making it easier to access online resources and information. This emphasizes the perceived practicality of English in the digital realm. However, over a quarter of participants express neutrality towards English making online world easy. And finally, almost the total population of the study considers English as the lingua franca of the social media which highlights its necessity for global connectivity.

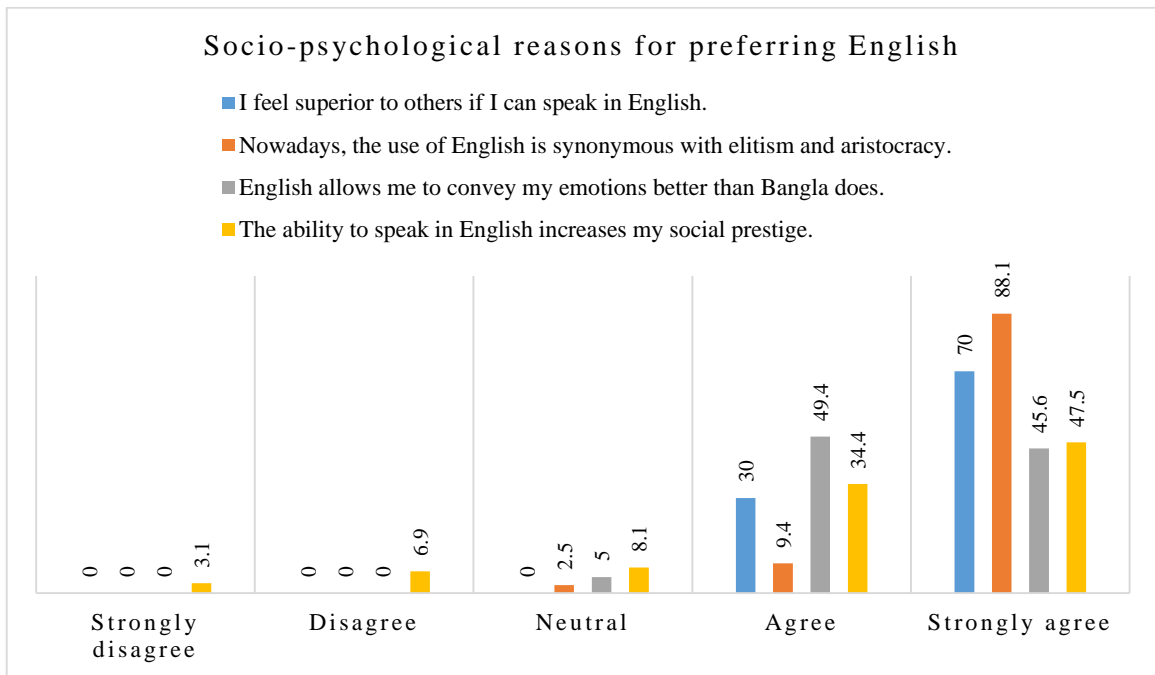
Figure 2
Socio-economic reasons for preferring English



In figure 2, we can notice that an overwhelming 90% of the respondents feel that fluency in English enables them to earn a handsome amount of money via freelancing and other online-based outsourcing jobs. This is not a mere statistics; this is evident that English is the lingua franca of digital economy. For instance, copy writing, programming, and digital marketing are some career opportunities opened by sound command over the English language. Additionally, about 9 out of 10 respondents affirm that ability to speak in English is a key that opens several job doors leading to bright careers. In multinational companies, English is often used as the common mode of communication. Thus, approximately 90% of respondents believe that English creates the employability and educational opportunities at international levels.

However, interestingly 7.5% participants did not give opinion, while 4.4% strongly disagreed; thereby, revealing few people may consider studying abroad through other languages. Nevertheless, the majority of research respondents feel that learning English and understanding its cultural implications are necessary for those aspiring to move to Western countries.

Figure 3
Socio-psychological reasons for preferring English



In figure 3, the perception of English as a sign of superiority is over intensely evident, with all respondents claiming that English proficiency makes them feel superior to others. Hence, there exists an inbuilt societal hierarchical link between personal superiority and proficiency in language. Similarly, nearly 98% of participants either strongly or moderately agree that the English language is closely associated with elitism and aristocracy. This unanimous agreement clearly demonstrates that English is perceived as a symbol of status, a kind of social ticket to elite circles and privileges. To the majority (95%) of these respondents, Bangla may never compete with English in terms of being an emotionally rich language. Consequently, English becomes the means for conveying precise messages compared to other languages making it appear like an instrument of communication for transmitting thoughts without distortion. Additionally, the ability to speak English is seen as a significant enhancer of social prestige, with about 80% endorsement that it boosts their social standing. In contrast, the remaining 20% of respondents differ on this point with strong disagreement, disagreement, and neutrality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is noted from the figures that familial reinforcement is one of the leading reasons behind the preference of English (mean score 4.10). The guardians believe English proficiency to be instrumental in achieving success, therefore encourage their children to give priority in learning English over other languages. Besides, the respondents admit that their teachers motivate them to use English both inside and outside the classroom (mean score 3.87). Thus, from family to institution, the learners get motivation to learn English for both personal and professional success in life.

The next finding with a high mean score of 4.00 indicates that English makes it easier for the learners to access online resources and information. The participants declare that English brings the digital world in their grips and this highlights the practicality and demand of English in the world of internet. The learners consider English as the lingua franca of the social media (mean score 4.49) which strengthens its necessity for global connectivity. On social media networks, English is frequently the language of choice for communication because it enables users to interact with a wider audience. To the participants, it is impossible for them to use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp without English.

Another finding of this study exposes that the respondents not only can explore the Internet for personal and social connection but also they can now earn a handsome amount of money via freelancing and other online-based outsourcing jobs (mean score 4.34). English proficiency is highly required for high-paying jobs in multinational corporations and international organizations etc. As Bangladesh integrates further into the global economy, English becomes increasingly important for commercial communications, e-commerce, and collaboration with international partners. The learners also believe (mean score 4.48) that English opens multiple scopes for employment opportunities and bright careers and this belief works as one of the leading socio-economic reasons for learning English in Bangladesh. The next finding reveals that a sound knowledge of English helps the learners avail opportunities to study abroad and migrate to first world countries (mean score 4.65) which is a popular goal among Bangladeshi private university students.

In the findings related to socio-psychological reasons for preferring English, it becomes evident that English proficiency makes the learners feel superior to others (mean score 4.70). This finding clearly indicates the idea of social discrimination in terms of status because of language proficiency in English.

The most significant reason (mean score 4.86) that this study found for preferring English in private universities is that the learners unanimously consider English as a kind of social gateway to elite circles and privileges. Learners are often motivated to view English as an embodiment of modernity and advancement. Another important reason the findings bring out is that English allows the learners to convey their emotions better than Bangla does (mean score 4.41). That is to say, English becomes the means for conveying messages compared to other languages and it appears like an instrument of communication for sharing thoughts and ideas.

All these findings regarding the reasons for preferring English in private universities strengthen the continuation of the legacy of colonial fervor in Bangladesh. English became the standard language of instruction in higher education during British administration. This established the foundation for its ongoing use in academics. Not just in private universities but in many other institutions across the country, English continues to be the key language of

instruction. As we now know, having a strong command of the English language is frequently linked to better educational and career opportunities.

The legacy is further accelerated by the belief of the learners that attending English-medium education is often perceived as prestigious. Like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a prominent Bangladeshi litterateur, there are many people in our society who aspire to adopt Western culture for success and fame.

Overall, in Bangladesh, English is idolized in high regard because of its close ties to social standing, professional and academic achievement, and worldwide connectivity. This perception is profoundly embedded in the historical context of British colonialism and is boosted by contemporary global dynamics. It is the colonial policy to change the mentality of the colonized. They continuously tried to propagate and implant the idea that by being comfortable with the English language and culture one can have a successful life, financial stability, and international recognition. Even now it is reflected in the attitudes and activities of the students and guardians in Bangladesh. The colonial ruler left a paramount impact on the socio-cultural and psychological aspects for which English is still a highly preferable language at all levels of education in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

The preference for English in private universities in Bangladesh stems from a variety of socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-psychological reasons. English is highly appreciated in Bangladesh's socio-cultural environment because it provides access to global culture and better education, and helps to explore the digital world. Guardians believe that proficiency in English enhances their children's chances of social and professional success. As for socio-economic reasons, it is viewed as a doorway to increased social standing, better employment prospects, and integration into the world economy. English language speakers are also considered to be more intelligent and capable of achieving success in the workplace. Private university students believe that proficiency in English can help them move up the social ladder and accelerate their networking opportunities and social mobility among the privileged and educated segments of society. Lastly, the socio-psychological reasons for preferring English in Bangladesh are entangled with issues of identity, class consciousness and social prestige. These socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-psychological reasons reinforce the preference for English in private universities making it a highly sought-after and prestigious skill in Bangladesh. In fine, it is evident that English in Bangladesh, especially in private universities, is perceived as a tool for global integration and personal achievement. This belief is deeply rooted in our psychology and still shapes our modern tastes. Because of all these practical reasons and inherited understanding, English is now seen as a language of prestige, learning, mobility and progress. And, this is how the legacy of English originating from the British Empire continues in Bangladesh.

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