

English as a Commodity: Linguistic Capitalism in Bangladesh's Private Tutoring and Coaching Centers

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Abstract

This paper explores the commodification of English in the case of the Bangladesh-based private tutoring centers, where English is being sold as a means of socioeconomic mobility and career success. Through qualitative interviews with coaching center owners, teachers, and parents, the study addresses how English as an asset is published and how tutoring supports the social disparities. Results indicate that English proficiency is regarded as a symbolic and economic capital that opens opportunities to some individuals and denies others. The paper has emphasized the effect of linguistic capitalism on education and provided perspectives on minimizing inequalities in language education.

Keywords

English commodification, Linguistic capital, Private tutoring and coaching, Neoliberal education

Introduction

English in Bangladesh is becoming increasingly found not as a language competency but as a commodity, a commercialized product, positioned as a social mobility instrument, a career-enhancing tool, and a promise of opportunities to go outside the country (Roshid & Sultana, 2023). English is commercially packaged in private tutoring institutions as a beneficial commodity, both in terms of its perceived economic value and the demands of an education and labor market that values proficiency. Its commodification is also an entry point, which determines access to higher education, professional opportunities, and international mobility (Mohammad M. Islam, 2019).

On the international level, political and economic transformations have increased the role of language, especially English, within the neoliberal economy. According to scholars, this refers to the commodification of language (Heller, 2010) or language as a marketable commodity (Bruzos,

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2023), meaning that it can be used as both a means of communication and a market product. This tendency is not confined to the educational sector, but it also applies to tourism, marketing, language teaching, and development (Beauregard, 2018). In Bangladesh, language learning centres are starting to make English an essential to succeed in higher education and well-paying professions, making mastery a linguistic capital, an exchangeable commodity to social performance and professional growth (Karim et al., 2023; Sarkar et al., 2021; Sultana & Fang, 2024).

In Bourdieu's (1977) theory of linguistic capital, language can be transformed into social and economic benefits. English is considered an essential resource in Bangladesh. The market value of the language is increased in the form of private tutoring centers that promote listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English, and allow tutoring to be used in exam preparation (IELTS, TOEFL, PTE), and specific applications of the language, such as academic and corporate English (Aurini & Davies, 2004; Hultberg et al., 2021). Through these services, students are able to take advantage of higher education, scholarships, and better employment, which demonstrates how linguistic capital easily translates into social mobility and economic benefit, according to Bourdieu's illustration of capital transformation. This study examines how English is constructed, marketed, and consumed in Bangladesh's private tutoring sector and addresses the following questions:

1. How is English positioned and marketed as a commodity within private tutoring and coaching centers in Bangladesh?
2. What linguistic capitalistic ideologies underpin the commodification of English in Bangladesh's coaching centers?
3. To what extent do these practices contribute to reinforcing linguistic capitalism in Bangladesh?

The research is a contribution to the knowledge on commodification of language in education, especially in developing nations such as Bangladesh. The study of the marketing, pricing, and consumption of English tutoring will provide valuable upshots by helping to understand how linguistic capital affects a neoliberal educational system and can benefit policymakers, educators, and practitioners in Bangladesh and other such situations.

Methodology

This research was a qualitative study which involved the use of in-depth interviewing of 10 coaching centre owners, 20 teachers and 10 parents who were chosen using non-probability sampling. A pilot study was used to ascertain the validity and reliability of the research instruments. Thematic analysis was used to study and identify central patterns and themes in qualitative data. Informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants were also taken into consideration in terms of ethics.

Result and discussion

Marketing, Positioning, and Economic Dimensions of English

Findings demonstrate that English coaching institutions in Bangladesh trade their products as pathways to academic and professional prosperity, particularly in exams such as the IELTS, TOEFL and PTE. According to the owners, students consider IELTS as their ticket to studying or working in a foreign country, so that is what we sell as the primary advantage. Owner-5 stated, *“Students see IELTS, TOEFL and PTE as the ticket to study or work abroad and get full funded scholarships, so we make that our main selling point.”* This is in line with international neoliberal notions that one must speak English to progress.

The data shows that English coaching has clear market logic; that is, language is vended as an investment, priced, and in packages. Owners have freely acknowledged that they charge more for English than for other subjects. Parents are not afraid to spend more on English since they regard it as the most lucrative subject, as owner-7 said, *“Parents do not hesitate to pay more for English because they see it as the most profitable subject.”* This applies to the idea of exchange value of Marx, in which English acquires a market value that overreaches its communicative value.

Parents insist on repeatedly stating tutoring as an economic investment in the future of their children. It is found in parents that even half of their salary parents pay because English will guarantee their children’s future career. As parent-11 remarked: *“Even if it costs half of my salary, I will pay because English will secure my son’s career.”* These sacrifices demonstrate the neoliberal education-as-investment ideology where families commodify learning as a way of gaining socioeconomic mobility.

Attention to exam preparation demonstrates the commodification of the English language as a product that can be measured. It is not enough to know English, as one of the parents said, *“you have to have the certificate that you know English.”* This reminds the concept of linguistic capital by Bourdieu (1997), in which the value is not only based on competence but also on the recognised credentials.

Bundling of services is also another economic feature. Packages such as mock exams, additional classes, and certificates are sold as add-ons by the centres. These are practices that commodify not only the language skills but also the process of learning, which is why Heller (201) argue that neoliberal markets make education a consumable good.

Ideologies and Perceptions of Stakeholders

This study revealed that students, parents and teachers perceive English as a form of capital that can bring about mobility and success. Parents referred to it as ‘the key to a better life’ and highlighted its ability to attract scholarships, overseas employment and coveted university spots. This reflects the notion of linguistic capital, where proficiency is viewed as a tradable asset with long-term returns. Furthermore, teachers also consider English as a status symbol, and not only a skill. One teacher remarked, *“When students speak English, society treats them differently; they are regarded as being more educated”*. This is in line with neoliberal ideas that make language become symbolic capital attached to prestige and identity.

Students themselves feel that English is providing them with a competitive advantage both domestically and internationally. One student *“Without English, you are invisible in the job*

market.” This perception is appropriate in the concept of English as survival capital, where the skill is associated with working and being a worthwhile social member.

Meanwhile, not all parents deny that they are pressured, and English tutoring is a necessary burden. This demonstrates the ways in which neoliberal discourses provide a moral compulsion to invest in marketable skills. The reinforcement of these concepts in coaching centres is the construction of the idea that success increases with the level of English proficiency- a similar sentiment to that of Park and Wee (2012) that language is a marketable resource.

It is found that English is not just language proficiency, but a competitive, market-driven, strategic resource. One of the teachers said, *“It is currency, it is English, and once you master it, the doors open anywhere, both domestically and internationally”*. Parents echoed this and said, *“We are investing in English the way we invest in shares, it will pay in the upcoming days”*. Through these statements, one can observe that linguistic competence is perceived as the symbolic capital, which bears prestige, as well as the economic capital, which opens the doors to the material possibilities. That the teacher calls English a currency, and the parent a financial investment, is an internalisation of the logic of neoliberalism in a literal sense, in what the teacher calls linguistic competence is not a skill, but rather a form of linguistic capital that has an explicit exchange-value. What this transformation means is that English is no longer a thing to be learnt. However, it is something to be purchased, something which is perceived to pay back in the here and future in terms of economic enhancement and social fomenting, in terms of the furtherance of a process whereby access to opportunity is arbitrated by the ability to acquire this new commoditised need.

The perception of coaching centres is actively built by way of offering certificates, training courses of the training of the accents and the courses of corporate training courses. By so doing, they increase the perceived quality of the English language in social and professional life. Students and parents absorb these market-based discourses, and success and upward mobility are traditionally directly linked to language mastery.

Social Stratification and Mobility

Commodification of the English language within the field of private coaching in Bangladesh is not only sustaining the existing social inequities but also offering discriminatory avenues of social mobility. Even average wage parents will forever discuss English tutoring as something they cannot afford to go without, even at the cost of a hefty sum. Parent-8 noted, *“We cut other expenses, but English coaching is non-negotiable,”* reflecting how access to English education is stratified by economic capacity.

Wealthier households have the money to purchase high-value services and programs, which offer a shortcut to foreign study and high-end jobs. One of the teachers noted that the better-off students would choose to have more comprehensive packages, and the poorer students would not be able to afford more than the minimum in spoken English. As this division exposes, the market of English leaves behind the holes of classes, not only in the schools but also in the labour market and favours those individuals who can invest in linguistic capital. It is also demonstrative of how economic and linguistic capital interrelate: the more money one has, the more he/she can hoard language and the more social stratification he/she can achieve. Conversely, students of poorer families consider English not merely a possession, but also a burden. One student

commented, “*Without English, I cannot dream of university abroad, but the courses are too costly.*”

This financial capital is transformed into linguistic capital by this market mechanism, establishing a hierarchy. The high-end English courses represent the direct access to global mobility on the side of rich, but on the side of the poor, basic spoken English is both costly and a symbolic response. Commodification of English, therefore, does not merely represent the existing social stratification, but a new linguistic stratification of classes is constructed. It is then based on the purchasing power of language skills to reproduce socially and solidifying the inequality between generations with a marketed education.

Conclusion

This work demonstrates that English in the private tutoring and coaching schools in Bangladesh is commodified and is involved as linguistic capital, which is a necessity to social mobility, career and career growth, as well as global opportunities. The centers position English strategically as a product to be marketed, priced like a quality product and encourages certifications, further strengthening its economic and symbolic status. The English language is viewed as a commodity and a source of status by students, parents, guardians and teachers, and its commodification contributes to the social stratification, favouring those who can afford high-quality services.

Future studies may describe the long-term implications of privatised English instruction on careers and upward social mobility, investigate fair access in state schools, investigate regional and gender differences, and examine the societal and psychological consequences of considering English as a commodity.

To conclude, policymakers are encouraged to control prices and quality in tutoring centres, educational establishments are encouraged to provide affordable and high-quality English programs, awareness programs are encouraged to promote balanced investment, and coaching institutions should implement inclusion to make higher education more accessible to deprived students and promote greater social equity.

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