English as a Status Marker on Facebook: The Case of Bangladeshi University Students

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Abstract

Nowadays, Facebook seems to have become a platform for people to show off their statuses (social, economic, educational, etc.) to the extent that their choice of language here can be linked to a status symbol. This study specifically examines the reasons and different ways Bangladeshi university students use English on Facebook to achieve status. Data were collected through observations of Facebook posts, a survey of 117 university students, and a semi-structured interview of 10 undergraduate students. The study found that most of the participants preferring English for Facebook posts and comments feel more educated, impressive, and prestigious. However, most participants agreed to preferring Bangla for personal messages. Interestingly, English is found to be preferred when writing to someone respectful in a formal context. Even participants with a weaker command of English were found to be using the language on Facebook without being bothered about linguistic accuracy. The study also found that all participants used code switching and code mixing between English and Bangla languages. These findings imply that English is mostly used by these university students to exhibit their high education status and language identities in public on Facebook.

Keywords: English, status, language identity, Bangladeshi university students, Facebook

Introduction and Literature Review

The English language undoubtedly has a great pervasive influence on almost all sectors of life in postcolonial Bangladesh (Hamid, 2022). Even when it comes to social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., most people, especially the young generation, can be seen to prefer English for communication. In Bangladesh, Facebook is the most popular social networking site with about 48 million users (Facebook users increase, 2021). My personal observation shows that university students in Bangladesh mostly use English on Facebook. It goes without saying that even the default language that they set on their Facebook handle is English. This seems to be true for students of both public and private universities across the country. Now, there can be various reasons for which this language is preferred. First of all, since the arrival of social media in 1995, there was a need for a lingua franca for worldwide communication. Lingua franca refers to an intermediary language used by speakers of different language backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2005; Berns, 2012). There were a few contenders for the position of a lingua franca on social media, but without much debate, it can be said that English holds that prestigious position now (Berns, 2009;

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Seidlhofer, 2011). As Berns (2012) and Jenkins et al. (2011) point out, English is used for communications in social media to reach the highest possible number of people. This was to ensure that no one is left out of the collective dialogue regarding whatever is happening across the world. However, the question is whether that can be the only reason why tertiary level students of Bangladesh prefer English on Facebook.

According to linguistic scholars, language is a "cultural, social and psychological phenomenon" (The Power of Language, 2019). From a cultural point of view, we can assume that the university students in Bangladesh will prefer Bangla, their mother tongue. However, when it comes to social and psychological points of view, a different trend can be observed in this country. Sultana (2014) demonstrated how English, alongside Bangla, is creatively, strategically, and pragmatically used by young adults in Bangladesh and the nationalist stance in favor of Bangla may not depict the complex linguistic scenario in Bangladesh. She reported how the issue of translanguaging or code-mixing between Bangla and English is very much present among young adults in Bangladesh and that translanguaging practice is mainly present in oral communication but almost all official written work is done in English. According to Ara (2020), "A major reason of this use of English in oral communication is to appear smart, confident and to show communicative competence"(p. 90). One research by Hossain (2013) found that whereas 95% students speak English with their friends and teachers in the university campus, only 34.5% do that at home. The reason for this particular behavior can be the status and power of the English language as 66% of the participants in that study agreed that they think speaking English elevates their status. Also, there is the issue of bilingualism. The younger generation, born after 2000, are more likely to be bilingual due to their greater exposure to English and their greater need to use it in their daily lives (Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2012). Hence, code-switching and code-mixing are common phenomena nowadays.

Moreover, in Bangladesh, English is considered "a stair of prosperity, a tool of acquiring knowledge, and a sign of sophistication" (Hossain, 2013, p.1). As Hasan and Rahaman (2012) opine, when linguistic pedagogy is concerned, the national language curriculum of Bangladesh did not quite make any systematic attempt to raise the standard of Bangla. On the other hand, English is constantly getting promoted across the globe. As Pennycook (2016) points out, several organizations such as the British Council are playing a role in promoting the global spread of English. However, if we observe countries like China, Hong Kong, or the Arab countries, we can find that they constantly promote their own languages and their respective languages enjoy the highest prestige in their societies. Some countries are not concerned about putting up signboards in English for the convenience of international tourists, but the scenario is the opposite in Bangladesh. Hence, it can be opined that the tertiary level students of Bangladesh would consider English not only an important language but also a "'status symbol" and perhaps, the main motivation for their learning and using English is to show others that they fit into the more "'standard" community of English-speaking people.

Now, if we turn to Facebook again, it needs no saying that its users are engrossed with

showing the best versions of themselves in public on social media and since Facebook provides a "popular agora for writing identity into being" (D'Arcy & Young, 2012, p. 532), its users can present themselves quite differently on Facebook from what they actually are. So, self-promotion is very much present on Facebook. Bazarova et al. (2012) pointed out that linguistic choices made by social media users carry social meanings as it includes the desires of negotiating relationships and controlling impressions of others. The issue of creating an identity of status can be connected to the issue of power and status of the English language in Bangladesh. So, it can possibly be said that the young generation in this country uses English to present their "standard" selves. Several studies (Ara, 2020; Awal, 2019; Alam, 2006; Banu & Sussex, 2001; Maniruzzaman, 2009; Erling et al., 2012) touch upon the issue of power and status of English language in Bangladesh and many (Haque Eyemoon, & Rahaman, 2021; Habib, Hossain, Ferdous, and Bayezid, 2018; Al-Jubayer, 2013) examine social media usage in Bangladesh, but the issue of language choice on social media to create a prestigious identity is not explored. Therefore, with regards to the particular speculations posed earlier, this paper will investigate these three research questions:

1. Do tertiary level students of Bangladesh prefer English on Facebook to achieve high status?
2. For what reasons do these students use English on Facebook?
3. What are the different ways in which English is used on Facebook by these students?

Research Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method design. Mixed method is a research design where multiple methods are incorporated to address research questions and involves collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting both qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study used the convergent mixed-method design in particular and the quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently. According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2018), a convergent design follows pragmatism as a theoretical assumption, and qualitative and quantitative methods are mixed to obtain the triangulated results in this design. Here, data sets are collected concurrently and then analyzed independently using quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches. The purpose of using a mixed-method design for this study was to compare both types of findings (quantitative and qualitative) and to get a fuller picture of the phenomena. The quantitative approach examined the objective aspects of the research problem and the qualitative one examined the subjective aspects of the problem and the experiences of the participants.

For this particular study, quantitative data was collected through an online questionnaire using a Google form which was developed for this particular research and it contained 20 close-ended and 2 open-ended questions. Convenience sampling was used to choose participants for the survey questionnaire. There were 117 respondents (students of two private and one public university from the first year to Master's level) who took part in the survey. The questionnaire was distributed to the students online through Facebook and Messenger. The form was kept open for one week for the participants to submit their

responses and then closed. The participants' identities were kept anonymous in the survey. Statistical data of the questionnaire was analyzed automatically in the Google form through Google spreadsheet and the data of the two open-ended questions were quantified.

On the other hand, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews of 10 undergraduate level students and observation of Facebook posts for a month to collect the corpus of status updates and wall posts. Purposive sampling was used to choose interviewees. First, observation was done on the researcher's Facebook handle for a period of 2 weeks to explore potential interviewees and then 10 university students were selected (5 students who used Bangla more and five who used English more on Facebook). The interviews were conducted on Google Meet and recorded, but not fully transcribed due to time limitations. Rather, notes were taken during and after the interviews and the data was analyzed using thematic text analysis. Notes were taken during observation on Facebook too and then analyzed thematically by identifying common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that came up repeatedly. The findings (both qualitative and quantitative) are presented with discussion in a comparative structure in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

Do students actually prefer English on Facebook?

The research has found that tertiary level students of Bangladesh prefer to use English on Facebook. This same result was found after analyzing the data collected through the survey conducted, interviews, and observation of Facebook posts. A surprisingly large number of 88 respondents (75.2%) out of 117 agreed that they prefer English on Facebook while posting something (see Figure 1). Interviews of 10 university students also established the fact that they all prefer English on this social media handle. Needless to say, through the observations done on Facebook, it was also found that more than half (about 60%) of the university-going population on Facebook use English on their Facebook handles.
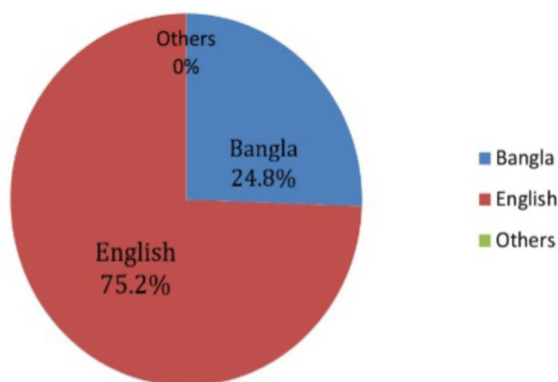
Figure 1: Preference for English for Facebook posts (results of the survey)

In one study, Hasan (2005) revealed that students are aware of the importance of learning the English language. However, he found that 59% of the participants are uninterested in

speaking English. It is quite interesting to note that while most students in Bangladesh are quite comfortable in using English in social media, in real life, they are uninterested in using the language for communicative purposes. Here, it is noteworthy that the participants in this research study were from Bengali ethnic background. Therefore, none pointed about using any other language while posting statuses on their timelines and hence, the result of other languages is 0%. What is more interesting here is that whereas most students prefer English for posting on their timelines, only half (50%) of them prefer this language while writing messages privately. The study found that 45% of the participants prefer Bangla and 5% prefer other languages while writing messages on Facebook (see Figure 2). From the interviews, it was found that the participants felt more comfortable in using their mother tongue while communicating with their friends and families. Contrastingly, they prefer English for formal communication via messages, for example, while communicating with teachers.
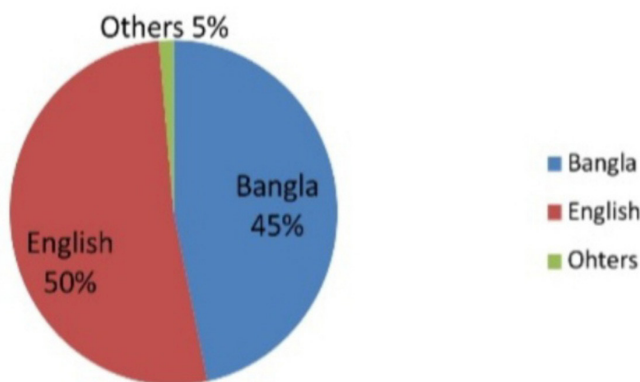
Figure 2: Students' preference for English in Facebook messages (results of the survey)

This particular behavior can be analyzed from their psychological point of view of appearing "standard" before others as most people can see posts on their Facebook timeline but messages are privately sent to a particular person or a group of people only. The literature also substantiates this claim. In this regard, one interviewee (no. 7) mentioned that, "messaging is like talking to a person. And I feel pretty comfortable to talk in my native language." Interestingly, one interviewee even pointed out that he prefers Bangla in message writing because people think he/she is showing off when he sends messages in English. In the interviewee's (no. 2) words: "if I message continuously in English, then people think I'm showing off because I'm a student of English department." Another (no. 8) pointed out, "most of my friends are comfortable with Bangla. So, I prefer Bangla language for messaging." So, it appears that the tertiary level students of Bangladesh prefer Bangla in writing messages on Facebook to feel included in their own community of Bangla-speaking people with whom they have closer bonds and whom they want to feel comfortable with while having a chat.

Reasons for students' preference for English

During the survey and interviews, similar reasons were pointed out by the students regarding their preference for English on Facebook. Furthermore, the observation of Facebook posts shed light on similar themes. Most participants (42%) in the survey reported that they prefer English because it is an international language and interestingly, a few (18%) pointed out that it is a "smart language." Related to this point, some (28%) addressed the issue of the need of English for their career and international communication. Also, since English as a lingua franca is needed for students for higher education, some (12%) pointed out that they use English on Facebook for academic purposes (perhaps, to practice the language or to put the language to use). Interviews also showed similar reasons for students' preference for English on Facebook. Here are some of the responses that the participants gave regarding these particular points (Note: the responses are given in their original version here without editing or grammatical corrections):

1. Because it's international language and it's easy to use.
2. Because it's international language and easy to understand for everyone.
3. I love English. It helps me to learn many things. It helps me to build good communication.
4. I prefer English language because it is globally used and helps us to connect with each other more than any other languages can. Also, by using this language we can understand many things easily. Like, histories which are mostly translated in English for the better understanding of everyone.
5. I prefer English language because of it is an international language.
6. It's a official language of most of the country in the world.

The next reason for their preference for English is definitely the issue of communication. Many (about 65%) have commented that they prefer to post something on Facebook in English because they have friends across the world and English, being a lingua franca, makes a bridge for communication. In addition, some (21%) pointed out the fact that English is easier to understand for themselves and to make others understand. Needless to say that in this era of global congestion, many of the young generation in Bangladesh have friends or family worldwide for which they feel the need for English to communicate. Similar remarks were made by interviewees too. In this regard, some of the comments from the students were:

1. English is a universal language. So, it would be better for all of my friends to understand my status properly as I have different kinds of friends from different nations.
2. Everybody can understand easily that language. I have also many friends who are live in another country.
3. English is an international language. Through this language we can communicate with other countries easily.
4. I prefer English language because it is globally used and helps us to connect with each other more than any other languages can.

5. Anyone can understand English in my friend list.
6. Because I've some foreign friends in my friend list. So, it'll be easier for them to understand.

Then, thematically, the next recurring point mentioned by most of the participants (84%) is that they find typing in English easier and more comfortable on Facebook compared to typing in Bangla, which is "difficult." The following comments by the interviewees show similar results:

1. It's more easy to type in English than Bangla.
2. Because I feel convenient writing in English. Typing in Bengali is difficult also I make tons of spelling mistakes.
3. I preferred English because it's quite easy to type.
4. Because English is very easy to write more than typing Bangla
5. Because it's very interesting. And it takes short time to type messages.

Now, it is well-known that languages like Mandarin or Arabic are quite difficult to type. However, the users of these languages seem to prefer their native language over English. Middle Eastern PR agency Spot On PR commissioned one study which indicated that Facebook's Arabic interface has grown 175% a year, double the rate of the social network's growth worldwide. Algeria saw the biggest rise, growing 423% annually (Brian, 2011). The Arabic platform's 10 million users make up about 35% of the region's Facebook subscribers, up from 24% in May 2010. 56% of Facebook users in Egypt (3.8 million) opt for the Arabic language version. If we turn to countries like Germany or Hong Kong, the citizens always prefer their native languages over other languages, even though these languages are quite difficult compared to English. So, why do young Bangladeshi people not prefer Bangla and show respect for their language? Can it be due to the subtle, indirect colonization of their minds due to the spread of the importance of English and the lack of importance of Bangla? Now, this issue is quite broad and out of the scope of this research, but this particular finding implies a subtle correlation between the choice of language and the importance or status that is attached to it, as was illustrated in the literature.

The next most recurring point, and perhaps the most important point to note in this research paper, is the issue of the "status"' of the English language. Many participants in the survey and interviews commented on things that either directly or indirectly express their urge to use English on social media to "look good." 40.8% participants of the survey reported "yes" to this claim. 30% of the participants thought that English does not make them look any better, and 29.2% remained neutral. Similarly, the comments below from the interviews validate the statement posed in this paper earlier that the university students of Bangladesh prefer English on Facebook to show off their "status":

1. Honestly speaking, I prefer English language to increase my value in everywhere.
2. Because I think it is the smart way.
3. It is classic and standard.
4. Because English language is the first priority in the world.

5. Coz it's a frequent language and smart language which we talk so randomly and usually.
6. Nowadays most of the people love to communicate in English, That's why I prefer this language.
7. Because of the acceptability to mass people as English is the universal and international language all over the world.

What is important here to note is that all of these reasons point to one thing: English is a powerful language, signifying status. So, using this language brings about a good image to the students for which they are drawn towards English even more than their mother tongue, Bangla, on Facebook.

When and how English is used

This section of the paper deals with the various contexts on Facebook in which English is used by tertiary-level students of Bangladesh and how they use the language. It will examine the issue of "status" in relation to when and how the language is used.

First of all, the study found that the participants prefer English in the formal context of communication. As mentioned earlier, they prefer English while communicating with teachers or other official personnel. The study found that most students (44.2%) use English with teachers "most of the time" while 40% use English "sometimes" and 9.2% use this language "all the time." Fewer than 10% of students use this language "rarely." However, when participants were asked regarding the language that they use to communicate with their families, friends, or relatives, most of them voted for Bangla (92.5%). Just a handful of the participants pointed out that they use English sometimes to communicate with family members, friends, or relatives living abroad. This clearly indicates that the students are aware of context-specific standard behavior. They use English to appear educated and "standard" to their community.

The study has also found that most of the students use English on Facebook when they want/need to "look good." In response to a question on this topic, 40.8% of the students agreed that they think using this language makes them look better in others' eyes. Another 29.2% chose "maybe" while just 30% confidently said "no." It was found in the survey that most students (18.3% "all the time," 33.3% "most of the time," 33.3% "sometimes," and 15% "rarely") are overwhelmed by people who write beautifully in English on Facebook. Also, around 60% of the participants assume that the university students use English on Facebook to "show-off" their level of education and/or language expertise, or social/economic class. Due to this particular perception, most of the students use English to write their status or captions on Facebook. Even 50% of the students said that they think captions in English are more interesting and catchier than Bangla, while 15.8% said "maybe," and 34.2% said "no." In this regard, the study found that a large number of students (60.8% "yes" and 15% "sometimes," 24.2% "no") even take text in English from the internet or some other source to post on Facebook. Interviews with the students also showed that some of the participants sometimes take quotes or ready-made captions from different websites and use them on Facebook.

Then comes the issue of code-switching and code-mixing. It was found that 26.9% of students are, most of the time, mixing their mother tongue, Bangla, and English in the same status, comment, or message. Here, 38.7% do it "sometimes," 6.7% do it "all the time," and 27.7% do it rarely. So, the mixing of these two languages on Facebook by a large number of students (around 70%) implies that they want to feel included in both the communities of native Bangla speakers and the lingua franca, English. Very interestingly, the study found that while only 9% of the participants said that they never check grammar, spelling, or such linguistic mechanisms while posting something in English on Facebook, 40% said they "never" and another 13.3% said they "rarely" check these while posting something in Bangla. This establishes the fact that students are more conscious while writing something in English so that any error does not affect their "image." What is interesting to note here is that, even when these students write in Bangla, most of the time (79.2%) they use English fonts to type Bangla. This particular behavior can be explained with the point previously mentioned that typing in Bangla is comparably difficult for these students.

In the case of using hashtags on significant social/cultural/political phenomena, the students mostly (70%) prefer English. This is because 54.6% of them believe that they can reach more people on Facebook with English hashtags. In this regard, one student pointed out, "people are more attracted to English hashtags than Bangla." Another one mentioned that English in a hashtag makes it more highlighted and reaches more people. Here, only 20% of the survey respondents said that they do not think English will help to reach more people.

The study found a very interesting correlation between the context and the language used therein. It was seen that most students use Bangla (both in Bangla font or Bangla in English font) for writing something on Facebook on occasions like Pohela Boishakh, International Mother Language Day, Independence Day, Victory Day, or other national days. In contrast, these students prefer to use English to write something on occasions like English New Year, birthdays, or any international event. The interviews have established similar findings.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study has found that most of the university-going students in Bangladesh prefer to use the English language on social media. There is no denying that social media like Facebook has become a craze for the young generation in Bangladesh. Millions of people here use Facebook on a daily basis for various purposes: from simple communication to conducting businesses (Prothom Alo, 2021). The university students of this country are no exception to this. It is to be noted that participants for the study were chosen based on the criteria that they were Facebook users. The riveting fact is that when possible participants were approached and asked if they use Facebook or not, none of them answered in the negative. This shows how popular and influential this particular social media is. And when it comes to portraying oneself to others, everyone desires to appear well. Many studies have examined the relation between self-esteem and the use of social media sites which showed how people with low self-esteem tend to use more social media sites to enhance their

self-image and self-esteem (Błachnio, Przepiorka, & Rudnicka, 2016; Denti et al., 2012; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011 as cited in Hawi & Samaha, 2016). Therefore, it is no wonder that most users of Facebook from the young generation of Bangladesh are concerned about presenting their best versions before others in public. Many post edited photos, filtered images, and so on just to look good in others' eyes. The fact seems to be true in case of their choice of language too.

English is undoubtedly deemed as a language of art, culture, power, and sophistication. In one study, Rahaman, Quasem, & Hasam (2019) showed how English medium students in Bangladesh try to attain an imaginary height of excellence by shaking off their culture and heritage, and becoming eager to explore those of the people of English-speaking countries. As Rahaman, Quasem, & Hasam (2019) point out, "English language is a symbol of high brow which makes them feel upgraded or elevated to some extent" (p. 41). So, being skilled in English is quite a great achievement for a person here. Also, the issue of colonization remains and even Bangla medium students are found to prefer English on Facebook. Therefore, the paper implies that English is preferred as a status marker on Facebook by the university level students in Bangladesh. However, the findings of this study should not be generalized. The study was quite small-scale with about two hundred participants only, and that too from only three universities. Also, no comparative study was conducted to examine if students from public and private, rural and urban areas yield different results. Further research can surely give more insights to the existing findings of this study.

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Appendix 1
Questionnaire

Dear students,

This survey is to gather information about Bangladeshi university students' preferences regarding the use of English language on Facebook. Your responses will be kept confidential. Kindly answer all the questions. Thank you.

Regards,

Monisha Biswas

Email: monisha@ewubd.com

Choose one option:

1. Which language do you prefer the most while posting someting on Facebook?
    a. Bangla   b. English   c. Others
2. Which language do you prefer the most for writing messages on Facebook?
    a. Bangla   b. English   c. Others
3. How frequently do you use Bangla to communicate with your teachers on Facebook?
    a. All the time   b. Most of the times   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely
4. How frequently do you use English to communicate with your teachers on Facebook?
    a. All the time   b. Most of the times   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely
5. Do you think using English on Facebook makes you look better in other's eyes?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
6. Do you think captions in English are more catchy and interesting than captions in Bangla on Facebook?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
7. Do you mix Bangla and English languages in the same status/comment/message on Facebook?
    a. All the time   b. Most of the times   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely
8. Do you get overwhelmed by people who write beautifully in English on Facebook?
    a. All the time   b. Most of the times c. Sometimes   d. Rarely
9. Do you feel jealous of people who can write in good English?
    a. All the time   b. Most of the times   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely
10. Do you think university students use English on Facebook to show off their level of education or language expertise to impress others?
    a. Yes b. No c. Maybe

11. Do you think university students use English on Facebook to show off their social and/or economic class to impress others?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
12. Do you check for grammar, sentence structure, spelling and such when writing a status in English on Facebook?
    a. Always   b. Most of the times   c. Some   d. Rarely
13. Do you check for grammar, sentence structure, spelling and such when writing a status in Bangla on Facebook?
    a. Always   b. Often   c. Sometimes   d. Rarely   e. Never
14. Have you ever taken any text written in English from the internet or any other source to use on Facebook for posting statuses/messages/captions?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
15. Have you ever taken any text written in Bangla from the internet or any other source to use on Facebook for posting statuses/messages/captions?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
16. Have you ever typed Bangla using English fonts on Facebook?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
17. Which language do you prefer the most while communicating with family/friends/relatives?
    a. Bangla   b. English   c. Others
18. Do you think using English on Facebook will make you reach more people?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
19. Have you ever used a hash-tag in Bangla on Facebook?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
20. Have you ever used a hashtag in English on Facebook?
    a. Yes   b. No   c. Maybe
21. If you prefer English on Facebook, kindly write down the reason/s for it:
    ………………………………………………………………………………..
22. If you prefer Bangla on Facebook, kindly write down the reason/s for it:
    ………………………………………………………………………………..

Appendix 2
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Core questions:
1. Which language do you prefer the most for posting status and writing messages on Facebook and why?
2. Which language do you prefer the most for communicating with family/friends/relatives and with teachers?
3. Do you check for grammar, sentence structure, spelling and such when writing a status or message on Facebook?
4. Do you mix Bangla and English languages in the same status/comment/message on Facebook?
5. Can you point out a few occasions when you use Bangla and when you use English on Facebook?