

# Linguistic Imperialism Revisited: An Analysis of the Role of English in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

English language has gained the status of being the *lingua franca* of today's world. It enjoys more privileges in the territories which used to be under British rule. Bangladesh, being one such postcolonial country, emphasizes the role and importance of the English language in its education system and society. In spite of Bangla being the state language, English enjoys the privilege of being the dominant language in major domains such as education. The results of the national examinations, where the reason for failure for most of the students is lack of competence in English, only asserts the importance of English in our education. Therefore, it can be said that this privileged language is pushing Bangla to the threshold, making it a vernacular in a country where majority speaks Bangla. Consequently, it evidently creates "structural and cultural inequalities" (p. 47) within the society as asserted by Phillipson (1992) and reconfirms the notion of linguistic imperialism in the context of Bangladesh. The obvious manifestation of inequality created by the role of English language in the education system can be observed in the three mediums of schooling existing in Bangladesh which ultimately produces three categories of citizens for the country. Thus, this paper aims to discuss the current role of English in Bangladeshi education and society, and also intends to explore linguistic imperialism in 21st century Bangladesh. The paper will consider views from both proponents and critics of linguistic imperialism. It will try to come up with an answer regarding the relevance of linguistic imperialism and whether this notion should have a preference or not in this age of globalization.

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**Keywords:** Linguistic Imperialism, Cultural Imperialism, Bangladesh, Globalization, New Perspectives

## Introduction

The hegemony of the English language in all domains of life such as social, cultural, and, most importantly, educational is a clichéd claim to be restated, due to the status of the English language being the *lingua franca* of today's world, much to the concern of the non- native speakers of English. This is because this dominant and powerful language of international communication poses not just inequality but also stress and anxiety to the speakers whose first language is not English. History goes a long way back to examine the reasons for the widespread use of English and the current position it has today. This extensive spread of English has not been treated without criticism and some critics such as Phillipson and Pennycook argue that English is not only spreading all over the world, it is also contriving and imposing a cultural and financial dominance on other countries and thus posing threat to different indigenous languages. Phillipson (1992) calls this phenomenon “linguistic imperialism.”

Considering the existing and growing concerns regarding the positive and negative roles of the English language which have drawn immense criticism, the issue this paper wishes to address is, whether imperialism and dominance of the English language are always imposed from the core countries by the native speakers of the language. Thus, the paper will discuss the reasons for English becoming the global language and the effects it has on the world. The paper will also evaluate various views on “linguistic imperialism” and review the relevance of the notion of “linguistic imperialism” in the context of postcolonial Bangladesh in a globalized world.

## The Global Spread of English and Linguistic Imperialism

In order to pose a threat to other languages and cultures, a language has to be in the dominant position. To discuss the notion of English linguistic imperialism, it is therefore necessary to consider the reasons for the spread of English. According to David Crystal (1997), “A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (p. 2). Therefore, in order to be a global language, a language has to ensure its usage even in the countries where there are no native speakers of that particular language. The use of a language in non-native countries can be established in two ways – by using the language in education, government and in other important domains, thereby giving it official status, and by prioritizing the language in the foreign language teaching of a country without giving it official status (Crystal, 1997). English is used in most of the countries of the world either as a second or foreign language and it is evident that English is the global language of today's world. However there are some reasons behind the widespread use of English.

According to Crystal (1997), the growth of Britain as a colonial power and the US financial supremacy are the two main reasons for the global status of English today (p. 53). This notion regarding the status of English is strengthened by two essential criteria of becoming a global language identified by Crystal (1997) which are “political power of its people” and financial power “to maintain and expand it” (pp. 7-8). Since English is the language of both of these powerful nations, the importance of English has amplified in accordance with globalization and with the increasing political and financial power of the aforementioned countries. Apart from these factors Crystal (1997) points out some more practical and obvious reasons for the spread of English in today’s world. English is the dominant language in international communication, in major international organizations, in international media, press, and even in film media. The role of English in the educational sector is unquestionable as Crystal (1997) states “English is the medium of a great deal of the world’s knowledge” (p. 101). English is the dominant language for conducting research and for publishing science articles (Ferguson, 2006). Last but not the least, the force that has geared the growth of English most is the current technology- internet. According to Crystal (1997) “English is the chief *lingua franca* of the internet” (p. 107) and “about 80% of the world’s electronically stored information is currently in English” (p. 105). All these reasons indisputably provide the status of the *lingua franca* of the modern world to English language.

However, the current status and spread of English has been viewed as a growing threat to other cultural and linguistic identities in the world by critics such as Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994). Language is not merely a medium of communication, it also embodies culture, values, and beliefs, and the dominance of one may endanger other languages and societies through cultural, political, and economic means.

Phillipson (1992) in his widely acclaimed book *Linguistic Imperialism* discusses the role of English between “core” and “periphery” countries (p. 17) – a concept which reflects Kachru’s (1985) three circles of English. “Core” countries or the “inner circle” countries, as Kachru termed them, refer to the states where English is spoken as a native language. Phillipson then distinguishes between two types of “periphery” countries – the first type are the countries where the role of English is limited to “international link language” and the second represents countries which used to be British colonies “and where the language has been successfully transplanted and still serves a range of intranational purposes” (p. 17). These two types are equivalent to Kachru’s notion of “expanding” and “outer circle” countries. This discussion clarifies that English plays a major role especially in the second type of “periphery” countries in many significant domains such as education. As a result, English continues to secure its position in those countries till date.

According to Phillipson (1992), “English linguistic imperialism is that the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and

continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (p. 47). Being the dominant language in a significant number of domains in most of the countries of the world, English promotes inequality between its proficient and incompetent users which is referred to as “Linguicism” by Phillipson (1997). He defines Linguicism as “ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (p. 47). Phillipson's concept of “Linguistic Imperialism” is based on the “imperialism theory” of Galtung (1980, p.107 cited in Phillipson, 1992, p.52) which regards the relationship between societies as dominant and dominated ones. “English Linguistic Imperialism” implies this relation between “core” and “periphery” countries.

In today's world where English is the global language, particularly in “periphery” countries, it is considered as the medium which provides access to knowledge and power, and is creating a division between people who can access it and those who cannot.

Pennycook (1994) illustrates this notion further as he states that since English plays a dominant role in most of the educational domains in the world, it has taken the position of determining opportunities for people regarding “further education, employment, or social positions” (p.14). He also states that in countries which had been British colonies before “small English speaking elites have continued the same policies of the former colonizers, using access to English language education as a crucial distributor of social prestige and wealth”(p. 14).

Therefore, it can be said that English continues to maintain its “hegemonic position” (Phillipson, 1992, p.72) throughout the world. Bisong (1995) summarizes the notion of linguistic imperialism as “the linguistic relation between the Centre and the Periphery has been and continues to be one of dominant and dominated languages” (p. 123). Bisong also states, that according to Phillipson, English is also responsible for the extinction and displacement of “indigenous” languages in periphery countries. Bisong further investigates Phillipson's notion and relates culture with the imposition of English and states, “The dominance of English has also resulted in the imposition of the Anglo-Saxon Judaeo-Christian culture that goes with it, so that indigenous culture have been undervalued and marginalized” (p. 123). This proves that, as language is an essential part of culture, linguistic imperialism involves cultural imperialism as well (Phillipson, 1992, p. 53).

Phillipson (1992) considers the “British Council,” “Ford Foundation” as tools of linguistic imperialism because, according to him, the core countries use these agencies for the sake of their interest in promoting their language throughout the world. He relates the notion of “Linguistic Imperialism” to the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession and marks it as a mechanism of imposing the dominant language because ELT benefits the core countries more. In recent years, ELT has

become one of the most profitable commodities in the market. This perception of viewing ELT as a marketable product is reflected in the statement of the Director General of the British Council in the 1987/88 annual report cited in Phillipson (1992) where it was stated, “Britain’s real black gold is not north sea oil but the English language” (pp. 48-49).

However, the global spread of English is not without its effects. Ferguson (2006) points out four major negative aspects of the global role of the English language. According to him, English promotes discrimination between native and non-native speakers of English because native speakers naturally have greater command over English and thereby it creates inequality (p. 125). Secondly, English is the cause of inequality even within society. As the elites in “outer circle countries” (Kachru, 1985) consider English as a prestigious tool and use as a medium of social achievement, they do not want it to be accessible to all the classes of society, resulting in creating disparity within the society. Again, in many postcolonial countries of Africa and Asia, English is still used as the medium of instruction though it hinders the progress of learning (Ferguson, 2006, p. 126) whereas, studies have proved that providing education in students’ mother tongue brings associated benefits which in turn facilitates acquisition of the second language (Benson, 2010). Ferguson also points out that the worldwide spread of English may endanger and marginalize the role of other languages “by squeezing them from public domains, such as scientific communication and higher education” (p. 126). Finally, English is also responsible for “cultural homogenization” – a phenomenon termed “McDonaldization” by Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1997, p.28), which means, along with language, the norms and beliefs of a society are also influenced by English.

The above discussion provides an adequate picture of the pervasive role of the English language in the world and directs the discussion to explore the role of English in post-British settlements. The paper will now review the role of English and its effects, and examine the notion of *Linguistic Imperialism* in the context of Bangladesh.

## The role of English in Bangladesh

Phillipson (1992, p. 1) in his masterpiece *Linguistic Imperialism* shows interest regarding the role of English in third world countries. At this point “English linguistic imperialism” will be discussed in the context of Bangladesh – a third world “periphery country” under represented in linguistic research. The discussion here relevantly needs an overview of the educational system in Bangladesh. It will illustrate the importance of the English language in our society and education. It will also reveal the reasons for the existing class division in Bangladesh. Some of the reasons for the division in society owe their origin to English and hence the attempt of this paper is to explore *Linguistic Imperialism* from a different perspective in the Bangladeshi context.

I. Educational System in Bangladesh: Bangla plays a major role in the spirit of nationalism in Bangladesh because the Bangla Language Movement is the foundation stone in the process of the independence of Bangladesh (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007, p. 243). However, in spite of the importance of Bangla, English plays a very important role in the education system of Bangladesh. As indicated by Hossain and Tollefson (2007), there is no consistent language policy in Bangladesh and practically there are three kinds of schools in the educational system in Bangladesh which are “Bangla-medium school, English-medium schools and Madrasah education” (p. 248).

In Bangla medium schools, the medium of instruction is Bangla apart from the subject English and most of the children in Bangladesh attend Bengali-medium schools and study English for 12 years. However, there is a difference between Government Bangla-medium schools and private Bangla-medium schools. The private Bangla-medium schools offer more facilities than the government schools, focus heavily on English, and cost more than the government ones. Students from both types of schools take part in the two most important national examinations among others. These are the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations. The medium of instruction is English in English-medium schools which are located mostly in urban areas and accessible only to the wealthy social class (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007). The students of English-medium schools appear for O’ and A’ Level exams which are “prepared in England, administered in Bangladesh and marked in England” (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007, p. 253). The third type of school is “Madrasah Education” which offers free education and is attended mostly by poor rural students. These schools are mainly “religious schools” where the heavy focus is on religious studies and the Qu’ran, and usually do not provide students with science, technology, math or English studies (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007, p. 254). The amount of English taught, the qualification of teachers, and the English text books used in these three medium schools vary significantly, adding to the discrepancy in school and college education of Bangladesh.

This three-stream educational system is chiefly responsible for creating social class and division in society, an opinion echoed in Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam’s words in an interview with the daily “Prothom Alo” where he stated “We have an education system divided into three streams and with each stream comes a built-in class system.”

II. Social Hierarchy: Since the choice of educational system largely depends on social and financial status (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007, p. 254) and, given that there are three kinds of schools, these clearly produce students with different proficiency levels in English. These students face discrimination while pursuing higher education as English is the medium of instruction in higher studies (253), and in employment. Indeed, competency in English is an essential criterion to get a good

job. Students who attend English-medium schools have a greater advantage compared to students of the other two mediums both in higher education and employment. Bangla-medium students fall in between whereas the students from Madrasah Education are the most deprived ones and are faced with the most difficulty in seeking employment (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007).

This whole system creates a vicious cycle because education depends on social class; employment depends on education, and if one does not acquire a highly paid job, s/he will not be able to send their children to the schools where English is best taught. The discussion concerning the educational system of Bangladesh makes it clear that “English education contributes to significant class divisions” in Bangladesh (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007, p. 255) which can be called “English Linguistic Imperialism” as one of the claims made by Phillipson is that English creates inequality even within the society. Imam (2005) strengthens this claim by stating “Within Bangladesh global English functions as a tool for social-political differentiation and discrimination since English education is restricted to a specific class only” (p. 248). She provides a clearer view of the situation by explaining that students from English-medium schools consider themselves superior to the students of Bangla/ Madrasah medium schools and this phenomenon “reproduces Anglo-American hegemony” (p. 479). A similar view is echoed by Choudhury (2008) as she states that the small number of local elites in Bangladesh enjoy greater success and prestige in their educational, social and professional life because of their competence in English and the same language becomes an obstacle for the rest of the population on their way to achieving success because of their lack of proficiency.

The discussion and the views by scholars pointed out a class within Bangladeshi society reaping and enjoying the benefits of English education the most, compared to the other sections of the society and creating a social divide within the society. From this critical perspective, ELT now can be seen as the new tool to impose dominance of the English language on non-English speaking countries of the world. Consequently, if the practice of English language teaching (ELT) in Bangladesh is examined, it may reveal the interest of the core countries and a particular section of the society to ensure the sustainability of class division and hegemony.

**III. ELT in Bangladesh:** It has been suggested earlier that core English speaking countries promote English for the sake of their own interest and ELT is currently a profitable business. Phillipson (1992) views ELT as aid from the core countries in order to promote English including “teacher training and curriculum development activities” (p. 11).

Being a third world country, Bangladesh has to depend on the aid provided by the core countries. Naysmith (1987) claims that the teaching of English language “has become part of the process whereby one part of the world has become politically, economically and culturally dominated by another” (cited in Pennycook, 1994, p.

21). With this process of aid, Bangladesh government started a project named English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) in 2000, jointly funded by the Government of Bangladesh and the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK (Chowdhury and Ha, 2008). Subsequently, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced in the educational sector with a view to improving the standard of English among students. However, Hamid and Baldauf, Jr.(2008) have pointed out that the infra-structure needed for CLT practice is absent, particularly in rural Bangladesh. The subsequent lack of teacher training results in the poor performance of students and thus, increases discrimination between urban and rural areas. Moreover, Chowdhury and Ha (2008) point out the “cultural incompatibility” of CLT in Bangladesh and claim that the relationship between teachers and students which is based on respect is one of the obstacles in implementing CLT in Bangladesh. In this respect, ELT can be seen as a tool of “Linguistic Imperialism” imposing a language teaching methodology on a country without considering its social and cultural aspects.

From this point, the paper will direct the discussion towards the current status of English and the manifold views associated with it in Bangladesh. It will try to negotiate the relevance of holding the English language responsible for having a superior status over Bangla in Bangladesh, and for pushing Bangla to the verge of being a vernacular in the country which has a glorious history of Bangla language. To address the issue, the theories provided by the opponents of *Linguistic Imperialism* who vehemently refute the claims of the proponents will be taken into consideration.

## Different Views

This section deals with the alleged role of the English language in creating inequality within Bangladeshi society for the benefit of the core countries. Although English has been identified as creating severe class division in Bangladesh, the fault lies more at the door of the local elites rather than the core countries. Hossain and Tollefson (2007) state that in Bangladesh, “the urban middle and the upper classes depend upon their exclusive, high-quality English-medium education in order to sustain their privileged access to higher education and employment” (p. 255).

Therefore, although the situation coordinates with Phillipson’s notion that English creates “inequality” even within a society, it is the local elites who are in favor of the situation and benefit the most as Davies(1996) rightly “ironizes” the concept of *Linguistic Imperialism*– “imbalance is not imposed from without but from within” (p. 490). Moreover, the attitude towards English in Bangladesh is more positive including the people in villages who see English as a gateway to improving their condition and English is not considered “a colonial burden”(Hossain and Tollefson, 2007, 2005). Ferguson (2006) suggests making English accessible to all classes of society in order to improve the social condition and reduce disparity (p. 141).

Thus, the opposition's view toward Linguistic Imperialism sheds a different light on the situation in terms of the use of English language in Bangladesh and proposes to explain the scenario from a different perspective. The situation in Bangladesh and the role of English therefore is not as much an imposition from the core countries for the benefit of the native speakers as it is for the local elites. It is within our own country where the status of English has been maintained throughout to uphold the privileged elite class, as a result of which the society has been divided into several classes. Though English language is absolutely not the sole responsible factor for class division in the society, its responsibility cannot be denied to a great extent. At the same time, it is also true that the hegemonic position of English lies within the interest of this periphery country. Therefore, instead of emphasizing on the dividing nature of the *Linguistic Imperialism* theory, it is in our interest that Bangladesh being a developing country should focus more on enhancing the skills of English language among our people in order to compete in the global world.

Other than threatening and marginalizing a language, a further claim that the spread of English may endanger other languages, can be refuted by arguing that instead of English endangering other languages it is the local dominant language which causes threat (Ferguson, 2006, p. 128). An example from Bangladesh may further illustrate this event that though there are number of other ethno-linguistic groups in Bangladesh, no language policy for them exists in the country (Hossain and Tollefson, 2007, p. 243). The children of these communities have to pursue their education in Bangla and here Bangla is causing a threat to these indigenous languages.

In terms of cultural influence, English being the international language does not signify a particular culture only and learning English does not mean that the learner has to follow the culture and values of the “core” countries (Smith, 1987).

## Conclusion

Linguistic Imperialism as a notion does exist to some extent as it has been discovered in the context of Bangladesh; however, it is the result of the power relations between the elites and the masses of a country than the “core-periphery” power relation. English is the global language of today's world and its importance cannot be questioned. Bisong (1995) argues that today, people learn English for practical reasons. Therefore, in order to develop, to foster economic growth of a country, and to be in the global community, English is indispensable. English language, then, can be viewed as an opportunity provider and a medium for representing a peoples' own culture and belief to the world rather than considering it a new tool of supremacy and imperialism.

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## Appendix: 1

### Questionnaire for Teachers

[The following questionnaire has been prepared only for research and academic purposes. Your opinion is highly confidential and your name will never be mentioned anywhere in the research procedure. So please feel free to check the appropriate option and return the set in a week's time]

Name: [Optional]:

Gender: [Male]                      [Female] Age:

Teaching experience: [1-5 years], [5-10 years], [10-15 years], [above 15 years]

Education qualifications: B A, B A (Hons) (Literature/ Linguistics), M A (Literature/ Linguistics), M Phil (Literature/ Linguistics), PhD Literature/ Linguistics, Others

Mother language:

[Please check the right option according to your own teaching experience.]

1. I think the testing methods for English in different universities are outdated and need immediate change.

Strongly agree              Agree    Not Decided      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

2. I believe that the existing English language testing methods are effective for developing language abilities.

Strongly agree              Agree    Not Decided      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

3. I believe that the existing English language testing methods are effective only for developing reading and writing skills.

Strongly agree              Agree    Not Decided      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

4. The idea of communicative language teaching is up-to-date and essential.

Strongly agree              Agree    Not Decided      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

5. Language testing items should be more practical than theoretical.

Strongly agree              Agree    Not Decided      Disagree              Strongly Disagree

6. I think technology based communicative language testing system should be introduced to evaluate students' language abilities.

Strongly agree      Agree   Not Decided   Disagree      Strongly Disagree

7. The language skills covered by the syllabuses and testing systems have little relevance to the

practical professional needs of the students in later life.

Strongly agree      Agree   Not Decided   Disagree      Strongly Disagree

8. I think that the main targets for designing the existing English syllabuses and testing system

are to enhance students' grammatical knowledge.

Strongly agree      Agree   Not Decided   Disagree      Strongly Disagree

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Please write your valuable suggestions to develop the existing testing system of our public universities.

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Respondent's Signature & Date  
Signature & Date

Data Collector's

.....

Thank you for your help.



## Appendix: 2

### Questionnaire for Students

This questionnaire is designed for the survey of evaluation of English language tests at the universities in Bangladesh. This paper aims solely at research. The privacy of the information given here will be maintained strictly and will be used for academic purposes only.

#### Background information of the respondent

1. Name of the respondent: .....
2. ID No. ....Term .....Year .....
3. Name of the Discipline/Department: .....
- 4: Name of the School/Faculty: .....
5. Contact number: ..... Date .....

#### Questionnaire

(Please put a checkmark (☐) on the appropriate statement, or write down if you have any suggestions.)

1. I think literature courses are more effective than language courses for learning English.

Strongly agree      Agree    Not Decided    Disagree      Strongly Disagree

2. I think language courses are more effective than literature courses for learning English.

Strongly agree      Agree    Not Decided    Disagree      Strongly Disagree

3. I think that the existing testing systems contribute very little to language learning abilities.

Strongly agree      Agree    Not Decided    Disagree      Strongly Disagree

4. I think that the existing testing methods promote reading and writing abilities rather than listening and speaking skills.

Strongly agree      Agree    Not Decided    Disagree      Strongly Disagree

5. Technology based communicative language testing systems are more effective for language learning.

Strongly agree      Agree    Not Decided    Disagree      Strongly Disagree

6. Current testing system is only for passing the examination and getting certificates.

Strongly agree      Agree   Not Decided      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

Please write your valuable suggestions to develop the existing testing system of our public universities.

.....  
.....

Name & Signature of the Respondent

Name & Signature of Data Collector

.....

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Thank you for your help.

