



ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURAL MANIPULATION IN BANGLADESH: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the language choice issue and the linguistic as well as cultural impact of English language as an instrument of global domination. Relevantly, it will also discuss some factors that curtail the developments of other languages marginalizing their local needs, cultures, and traditions. It is widely known and accepted that the culture of each country or nation goes with its language. The excessive use of English in the 'periphery' marginalizes indigenous traditions and cultures. This is more evident in the context of Bangladesh, a developing country of South-Asia region with a long colonial legacy, is not free from the dreadful clutch of English. This study therefore attempts to explore how our language choice to English, disregarding our mother-tongue Bangla, fosters Western culture undermining the age-old Bangladeshi culture and tradition and will try to put suggestions for a tentative remedy of the situation.

Keywords: language choice, linguistic imperialism, cultural imperialism, lingua-franca, Anglo-centricity etc.

1. Introduction

English has become the dominant language of this global world (Crystal, 1997) and the context of Bangladesh is not an exception. A person with sound knowledge in English is frequently preferred and honored extravagantly in the society. Today, English has become a trademark of quality that it creates social stratification leading people to linguistic and cultural hegemony. Therefore, it seems important to have a common language all over the world through which people across the countries can communicate among themselves without any language barrier and maintain a sociable bond. Considering the importance of having a common language, English has turned into the 'lingua franca', that is, the common language. Kachru and Nelson (1996) state, "there is little

question that English is the most widely taught, read, and spoken language that the world has ever seen" (p. 71).

In our country, in all the private universities and also in some public universities, the medium of instruction is English. In order to achieve higher education or to secure a better job, one is supposed to learn English as inevitably. As a result, parents prefer to send their children to English medium schools so that they can make a strong basement of English from the very first day. Besides, a very good number of students are going abroad for higher studies and their learning is greatly influenced by the development of English. Moreover, the massive use of scientific or technological devices in our everyday life or as classroom materials consciously or unconsciously effects in the present condition

everywhere in Bangladesh. "As a consequence, language acquisition results in a certain level of cultural 'imperialism' as knowledge from one culture is transferred to another" (Penny, 2002, p. 4).

2. Background of the Study

Imperialism is a system in which a country dominates other countries from a distant territory in terms of language, politics, culture, economics etc. Culture is the habits, tastes and choices of people in a particular way of life. The aspect of culture deals with social, political, economic and ideological beliefs. In small countries like ours, colonialism has gone long before, and now it is the age of imperialism. The ruling nations dominate us through their language, culture and politics. Through linguistic imperialism, the ruling nation is taking away one's culture along with its language. In fact, it is difficult to explain cultural imperialism in a single sentence. To get a good understanding about cultural imperialism, we need to have separate knowledge about 'imperialism' and 'culture'. According to Merriam Webster dictionary culture is "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group" or "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization" and imperialism is "the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas".

Edward Said (1993) in his book *Culture and Imperialism* defines culture as "all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure" (p. 12). He also adds that culture is a "source of identity" (p. 13). So by losing culture through imperialism, we are losing our identity as well that we inherited from our ancestors. Phillipson (1992) also mentions that 'imperialism' has been primarily economic and this theory also encompasses the political, social and ideological dimensions of exploitations. Imperialism deals with politics including the culture and it takes place in our

daily life. Canagarajah and Said (2011) opine that this is an exercise of power at the transnational level with geopolitical implications. Cultural imperialism can be described in respect to the term 'Anglo-centricity' which means, the other languages and cultures will be measured keeping in terms of the English language and its culture; consequently, other cultures are thought to be inferior (Phillipson, 1992).

According to Canagarajah (1999), less developed countries depend on the developed countries, (i.e. western countries) for educational materials, methodology, expertise, and so on, which propagate cultural ideologies of the western countries. Phillipson (1992) says that the base of cultural imperialism is linguistic imperialism; hence, if a language is neglected, the culture of its native speakers is also neglected (p. 53). A language is not merely a language; it is mingled with culture. Cultural imperialism occurs silently through the exploration of ideas, theories and experiences, publication and so on (Phillipson, 1992). Phillipson (1992) quotes the Director General of the British Council who said, "Britain's real black gold is not north sea oil but the English language". The explanation of this statement can be found in Iredale's words (as cited in Phillipson, 1992):

... when people learn English, for whatever purpose and by whatever method, they acquire something of the flavour of our culture, our institutions, our ways of thinking and communication. (p. 11)

Phillipson again (1992) thinks that the promotion of British book-trade, which explores the centre's ideology and thought, is a remarkable medium of cultural imperialism. These books present the ideas, attitudes, activities which are the cultural element of the 'centre' and thought to be the model for peripheral countries (Phillipson, 1992, p. 61). Therefore, English language teaching (ELT) could have hidden agenda, because through such teaching, the ideology and the culture of the native English speakers could be propagated to displace, replace and encompass the culture of other communities.

Thus, we notice that dominant language is marginalizing the language and culture of the

inferiors in many ways. The students of English medium schools are using English in all of their curricular activities and using their mother tongue only when they get back home. As they spend most of their time in school, the dominant culture is taking its place by eliminating the native culture (Alfarhan, 2016). Modiano (2001) also states in this regard, “English is such a dominant force in world affair, there is a danger that its spread dilutes (and ‘corrupts’) the distinguishing characteristics of other languages and cultures” (p. 340).

3. The Context of Bangladesh

After the independence in 1971, guided by the thought of nationality and love for mother tongue, the government banned English medium schools, and they were completely removed from Bangladesh in 1972 (Banu & Sussex, 2001). However, English could not be removed from universities because the class lectures were needed to be given in English and the books and journals were all in English. On the other hand, the elite group of the society started to feel the necessity of English, and consequently English medium schools started to emerge again (Ainy, 2001). As English was not emphasized in public Bangla medium schools, the English medium schools started to grow day by day with the growing demand of English in every sector (Rahman et al., 2010). Since the 1980s English medium schools, which are all privately funded, have been mushrooming in Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka and in other metropolitan cities (Banu and Sussex, 2001).

The students of such schools follow the British curriculum and syllabus directly (Haque, 2009). They read imported western books written for the western context (Al-Quaderi & Al Mahmud, 2010). After reading these books, the students become familiar with western geography, history, literature, western way of life and their ideology. Consequently, they do not get to know about Bangladeshi culture, for example, they are much more familiar with Shakespeare or Milton than Robindronath Tagore or Kazi Nazrul and they enjoy celebrating Happy New Year or Birth Day parties than Pahela Baishakh or Nobanno Uthshob etc. Western ideologies and values are explored through

the books and curriculum of British council but there is no mention of Bangladeshi culture and Bangladeshi resources (Al-Quaderi & Al Mahmud, 2010).

Thus, English Language Teaching (ELT) in its all forms is a further continuation of linguistic and cultural imperialism of the ‘center’. This control or hegemony is being fueled by the strong sale of the British and American textbooks in periphery countries (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999). Marginalizing local cultures in this way have been gone vanished, and the result is that countries of the ‘center’ to impose their own cultures which are not related to the values, beliefs, customs, and activities of Bangladeshi people what remains in the ‘margin’ or ‘periphery’. Phillipson (1992) has argued that ELT can be seen as the facilitator of linguistic imperialism and mentions, “the tenets of ELT have ideological and structural consequences. They serve to strengthen the holds of the center over the periphery” (p. 192). The ‘center’ is thus, engineering cultural imperialism in the periphery countries like Bangladesh through the textbooks used in English as Foreign Language (EFL) or English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms.

4. Literature Review

In English medium schools and universities with the teaching of English language, learners are being taught the values of foreign culture. From food, clothing to the taste of music and literature—all the trends of the West are being blindly followed by our young generations. In Bangladesh, English is considered as a ladder to advancement and a sign of sophistication (Hossain, 2013). When learners start acquiring English, they may also start accepting the cultural, political and economic values of the dominant group to gain mastery over the target language (TL). This kind of acceptance can occur because teaching and learning always involves the “transfer and negotiation” of some kind of values and interests (Canagrajah, 1999, p.17). This transmission in different ELT contexts may lead to cultural homogenization and pave the way for cultural imperialism (Kumaravadevelu, 2003). Short says (as cited in Johnson, 2009) that in order to be competitive in global market. By interviewing people

Johnson (2009) finds out that achieving proficiency in English has now become a commodity. That is why the youngsters have been using their mother tongue with a sense of inferiority and consider English as superior. They might think that English will make them learn the basic skills of modern life, like they will get to attain efficiency in computer and driving. Besides, Pfeiffer (as cited in Phillipson, 1992) also talks about the devastating impact of imperialism on culture and language.

Again, Fishman (as cited in Phillipson, 1992, p. 27) says that what we are observing globally is that English is replacing other languages. This displacement occurs when English is given more importance than one's mother tongue or native language. Colonial language is being used for high status purposes and local language is being used for less prestigious work. We can observe same kind of scenario in Bangladesh as well. In Bangladesh English language and culture are being used to express the possession of a high status. Alfarhan (2016) also sees English as the depiction of cultural capitalism. English has influenced many other cultures that happen to be conservatives. Besides, John (as cited in Alfarhan, 2016) states that China is a country that has a very strong sense of cultural identity. They want to intact their own cultural value. But with the advent of English in the name of internationalization and through the applications of technology, there have been some significant changes in the Chinese culture with its development in science and technology also.

According to Phillipson (1992) leaders like Gandhi protested against English in India because the language brought "intoxication, denationalization and mental slavery" (p. 35) in every aspect of life. He also claimed that English corrupted the education system because students spent more time to learn this language compared with other subjects which was insufficient. This leader was absolutely aware of the hidden trick of the Englishmen. Macaulay (as cited in Al-Quaderi & Al Mahmud, 2010) in his 'Minute on Indian Education passed in 1835' mentions that they must form a class who will be the interpreters between them and others whom they dominate. They will form a class of people who will be "Indian in blood

and color, but English in taste and in intellect" (p. 212). Thus, English language and culture continued to grow in a gradual mode.

Phillipson considers the term *lingua franca* as "ambivalent" because this term is applied for dominant language which used to be the former colonial language (Phillipson 1992, p. 41). People use English to decrease their cross-cultural differences and build a new community where they get to share their ideas and respective culture in a broader way. But at the same time, English is a threat for other cultures as it does not let the culture to develop (Alfarhan, 2016). At present children of upper class are growing up without learning their native language. According to Shanta (2017) teaching and learning English is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh and we have given this language a unique position. English is meant to be used for academic and professional purposes. In fact it has become a new trend to speak 'Banglish' language and follow the cultural norms of the English.

5.1 Methods and Procedures

The study is conducted by means of interview and questionnaire. A semi-structured interview method is followed for the teachers. Interviews are electronically recorded. On the other hand, a written questionnaire is used to collect data from student participants. Before conducting the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested on 10 respondents to check the validity and reliability of this instrument. Based on the pre-test results, some necessary modifications were made to the study instrument. After collecting the data, it is interpreted and analyzed using SPSS, version 24.0. The results are presented in charts.

5.2 Sampling

The respondents were selected using a simple random sampling technique. The sampling procedure used was based on Creswell's (2009) recommendations since the results from this study are intended to be general. Creswell (2009) states "with randomization, a representative sample from a population provides the ability to generalize to the population" (p. 148).

6. Data Analysis

This part deals with description and analysis of responses to the questionnaire and demonstrates the results sequentially.

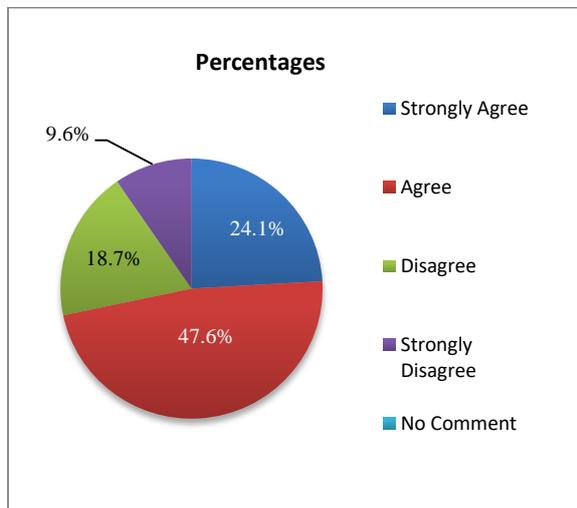


Figure 1. Sometimes English helps me to express my feelings in a more perfect way rather than Bangla.

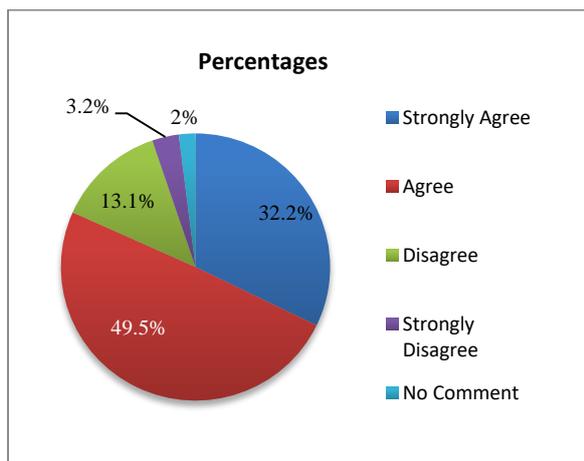


Figure 2. English novels/dramas/poetries/writings influence me to follow their culture.

7. Findings

From the above study, we get a mixed response about the uses of English language from the students and from their teachers. But they both have given the same opinion that they are somehow influenced by the Western culture. Therefore, their responses may be mentioned thus;

7.1 Students' Response

The findings of this study conform to those of other studies related to linguistic and cultural

imperialism phenomena. Almost three quarter of the participants believe English helps them express their feelings in a more perfect way than Bangla. And this number exceeds when it comes to the question if they are influenced to follow western culture when they read English writings.

7.2 Teachers' Response

Teachers accept that they encourage their students to learn and use English inside and outside the classrooms. Majority of them feel that Bangla language is threatened due to the excessive use of English in different ways. Of course, there are also a few who take English as an advantageous language, not detrimental to Bangla.

8. Conclusion

Thus, we notice from the above study that English has exercised power over our language and culture and sought to paralyze Bangla culture and tradition. We know that cultural imperialism goes hand in hand with linguistic imperialism, and they are much-known terms to ELT practitioners and experts. But, very little attention is given to these concurrent issues allowing English to displace our mother tongue and marginalize our culture. In both places (English-medium schools and tertiary level), students are strictly advised to use no language but English. The students read books written by foreign writers set in western context and become more familiarized with its culture and belief. Consequently, they decrease the use of Bangla, and gradually become detached from Bangladeshi culture as well (Haque, 2009). They start practicing western culture at the expense of their own tradition and culture. Such overindulgence of western culture in the forms of their life styles, attitudes, ideologies belittles Bangladeshi traditional way of life leads towards globalization, which Chang (2004) says is another name for westernization.

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