

The politics of language-in-education policy: Repercussions for English curriculum development in secondary schools in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study investigates how language-in-education policy in Bangladesh contributes to disparities between English-version and Bangla-version secondary schools, particularly in access to English resources, institutional support, and curriculum equity. Although Bangla is the national language, English continues to function as a key determinant of academic and socio-economic mobility. Using a quantitative survey of 60 Grade 9–10 students in Barishal, the study compares perceptions of English learning across the two school streams. Results show that English-version students reported 93.3% access to English materials compared to 30% among Bangla-version students and unequal curriculum opportunities (26.7%). Despite these differences, both groups strongly recognized the importance of English for future careers, with agreement rates of 96.7% among Bangla-version students and 100% among English-version students. The findings illustrate how current policy structures reinforce linguistic and socio-economic inequalities, privileging English-version learners while constraining opportunities for Bangla-version students. The study emphasizes the need for equitable curriculum reform, enhanced teacher training, and redistribution of English learning resources to promote fairness and balanced educational outcomes.

Keywords

Bangla-version schools, Bangladesh education system, English curriculum development, English-version schools, language-in-education policy, linguistic imperialism, linguistic inequality, socio-economic disparities

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Introduction

Language-in-education policy in Bangladesh has long been shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic forces that continue to influence educational practices today. While Bangla is the national and official language, English occupies a powerful position in the education system, functioning as a key resource for academic mobility, employment, and global communication (Hamid & Jahan, 2015; Rahman, 2020). Within this landscape, English-version and Bangla-version schools represent two distinct streams that differ in access to English proficiency. English-version schools follow the national curriculum but place significantly stronger emphasis on English, offering comparatively better instructional support, teaching materials, and language exposure. In contrast, Bangla-version schools-attended largely by students from lower- and middle-income households-often face constraints in resources and teacher training, resulting in limited opportunities for effective English learning (Maniruzzaman & Haque, 2022).

These disparities contribute to a widening educational and socio-economic gap. English, despite being taught as a subject, becomes a marker of privilege for English-version students who receive stronger institutional support. Meanwhile, Bangla-version students frequently encounter systemic challenges that restrict their access to high-quality English instruction. This dual-track schooling system reflects broader issues of linguistic inequality, aligning with Phillipson's (1992) notion of linguistic imperialism, where access to English reinforces existing hierarchies and determines future opportunities. Scholars argue that while proficiency in English can empower learners, unequal access to English instruction simultaneously marginalizes students from less advantaged backgrounds (Sultana, 2019; Rahman & Pandian, 2018).

Despite extensive research on language-in-education policy and English language learning in Bangladesh, prior studies have largely concentrated on policy discourse, urban educational settings, or elite English-medium institutions. Comparatively little attention has been paid to students' own perceptions within the national curriculum streams, particularly at the secondary school level. Furthermore, empirical investigations focusing on regional contexts outside major metropolitan areas remain limited. Consequently, the experiences and perceptions of students in regional locations such as Barishal regarding disparities between English-version and Bangla-version schools are insufficiently explored.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how students from English-version and Bangla-version schools in Barishal perceive English education and how these perceptions reflect broader inequalities in Bangladesh's language-in-education policy. Specifically, the study examines disparities in access, institutional support, curriculum relevance, and attitudes toward English across the two school types. By exploring these issues, the research highlights how English continues to shape educational experiences and influence future prospects, underscoring the need for balanced, equitable, and inclusive English curriculum development.

Specifically, it asks: How does the dominance of English as a foreign language influence language-in-education policy, particularly in creating advantages for English-version schools over Bangla-version schools? In what ways does unequal access to English instruction in these two school streams contribute to socio-economic disparities between students from different backgrounds? And why does English continue to hold a dominant position in English-version institutions despite not having official language status in Bangladesh? By addressing these questions, this study highlights the tensions between linguistic justice, curriculum reform, and the pursuit of equitable educational opportunities in contemporary Bangladesh.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the field of LPP (Language Policy and Planning), which emphasizes that language choices in education are inherently political and closely linked to issues of identity, equity, and access. As Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) note, language policies reflect not only linguistic considerations but also cultural, economic, and ideological priorities. Recent scholarship extends this view by framing language policy as a matter of linguistic justice, arguing that unequal access to dominant languages reproduces social inequalities (De Meulder, Kusters, & Moriarty, 2019; Flores, 2020). In Bangladesh, where English maintains disproportionate influence despite its status as a foreign language, these perspectives help explain how language-in-education policy contributes to stratification across different school streams.

This research centrally employs Phillipson's (1992) concept of linguistic imperialism, critiquing the global spread of English as a process that sustains hierarchical divisions between privileged and marginalized learners. Contemporary scholars further contextualize this dynamic through the lens of neoliberal globalization, where English is not merely a language but a form of capital that shapes employability, mobility, and class identity (Block, 2022; Ricento, 2021). English-version schools in Bangladesh, which generally offer stronger English instruction and better resources, embody this neoliberal logic. English-version schools position English proficiency as a pathway to enhanced opportunities, whereas Bangla-version students often remain at a relative disadvantage due to limited institutional support.

Additionally, the study draws on critical pedagogy and postcolonial perspectives, which examine how educational structures can either reproduce or challenge existing inequalities (Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 1998). Postcolonial theorists highlight that the continued dominance of English in South Asia is rooted in historical patterns of colonial influence and cultural hegemony (Canagarajah, 2020). These perspectives underscore the understanding that curriculum development is not a neutral process but a site of ideological contention in which issues of equity, identity, and justice are negotiated.

By integrating LPP, linguistic imperialism, neoliberal theory, and postcolonial critical pedagogy, this theoretical framework positions English curriculum development in Bangladesh as a space where global aspirations intersect with local inequalities. It provides a lens for examining how English shapes policy decisions, reinforces socio-economic disparities between English-version and Bangla-version students, and maintains its privileged status despite lacking official recognition.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to examine how the dominance of English as a foreign language shapes language-in-education policy in Bangladesh by creating advantages for English-version schools over Bangla-version schools, to investigate how unequal access to English resources and instructional support across these two streams contributes to socio-economic disparities among students, and to analyze why English continues to hold a dominant position within English-version institutions despite not being an official language, influencing students' perceptions, curriculum practices, and future opportunities.

Research Question

1. -How does the dominance of English as a foreign language influence language-in-education policy, particularly in creating advantages for English-version schools over Bangla-version schools?

2. -In what ways does unequal access to English instruction in these two school streams contribute to socio-economic disparities between students from different backgrounds?
3. -And why does English continue to hold a dominant position in English-version institutions despite not having official language status in Bangladesh?

By addressing these questions, this study highlights the tensions between linguistic justice, curriculum reform, and the pursuit of equitable educational opportunities in contemporary Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Language-in-education policy in Bangladesh reflects a persistent tension between the official status of Bangla and the growing socio-economic value attached to English. While Bangla remains the medium of instruction for the majority of students, English functions as a powerful linguistic resource shaping educational opportunities, social mobility, and identity (Hamid & Jahan, 2015; Rahman, 2020). Within the national curriculum, students are divided into English-version and Bangla-version streams, which differ markedly in their exposure to and support for English. English-version schools generally provide stronger instruction, better teaching materials, and more consistent institutional support, whereas Bangla-version schools face limitations in teacher training, classroom resources, and access to English materials, resulting in unequal learning outcomes and linguistic disadvantage (Maniruzzaman & Haque, 2022).

Recent empirical and policy-focused research reinforces these patterns of inequality. The British Council (2022) review of English teaching, learning, and assessment highlights systemic challenges in teacher preparation, materials, and assessment practices, disproportionately affecting Bangla-version classrooms. Similarly, the National Student Assessment (NSA, 2022) identifies learning gaps at lower grades that, if left unaddressed, risk propagating into secondary-level English achievement. Field studies and policy analyses from 2023–2025 document the rapid expansion of English-version streams within the national system and reveal recurring gaps in resources, assessment, and teacher preparation-gaps that mirror and reinforce socio-economic inequalities.

Studies on medium of instruction reveal a tension between policy and practice. Although Bangla holds official status, classroom practices and parental demand for English often favor English-version schools, granting them relative advantage in resources, instruction, and parental investment (i-jte.org, 2023). These dynamics reflect broader global trends in which English is treated as a form of cultural and economic capital, influencing access to higher education and professional opportunities (Sultana, 2019; Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Block, 2022; Ricento, 2021). Within Bangladesh, English-version schools exemplify how linguistic capital is distributed unevenly even within the national curriculum, privileging some learners while structurally disadvantaging others.

Theoretical perspectives from linguistic imperialism and postcolonial studies help explain these disparities. Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism argues that English perpetuates hierarchical distinctions between privileged and marginalized learners, a pattern evident in the differential support offered to English-version and Bangla-version students. Postcolonial scholarship further notes that the dominance of English in South Asia reflects colonial legacies that continue to shape notions of modernity, prestige, and socio-economic success (Canagarajah, 2020; Pennycook, 1998). Critical studies also show that neoliberal labour markets and post-pandemic recovery policies have further commodified English as employability capital, making access to English instruction within the national system a mechanism of social stratification unless policies address redistribution of resources, teacher development, and equitable assessment.

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature focuses on elite English-medium institutions, leaving a gap in understanding inequalities within the national curriculum streams themselves. Few studies investigate how English-version and Bangla-version schools, despite following the same curriculum, provide significantly different levels of access, resources, and learning environments. Students' perspectives on these disparities are also underexplored. By focusing on secondary students in Barishal, this study seeks to fill that gap, offering a nuanced understanding of how English functions both as a resource and a barrier within Bangladesh's mainstream education system.

Method

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative survey research design to investigate and compare the attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of students from English-version and Bangla-version schools in Barishal regarding English language learning. A structured questionnaire was selected as the primary data collection tool because it allowed for efficient collection of information from a larger group of participants and facilitates the quantification of students' opinions, attitudes, and experiences.

The questionnaire was developed by the researcher with reference to previous studies on language-in-education policy and English learning (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Nation, 2003). The items were adapted and contextualized to suit the Bangladeshi secondary education context, specifically targeting Grade 9 and Grade 10 students. The instrument was divided into two sections: (1) demographic information, including age, gender, type of school, grade level, socio-economic background, and primary language spoken at home; and (2) research-related items, which focused on access to English education, perceptions of English and Bangla, socio-economic disparities, curriculum and policy implications, and experiences in English-medium education. Items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree), with additional open-ended questions to gather qualitative insights.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two ELT experts. Feedback from the experts helped refine the clarity, wording, and relevance of several items.

The Sample Population

The study involved a total of 60 students from Grade 9 and Grade 10. Of these, 30 students were from English-version schools—15 from Jahanara Israel School and College and 15 from Adventist International Mission School—and 30 students were from the Bangla-version, Nooria Secondary School. Class lists of Grade 9 and Grade 10 students were collected. Participants were then randomly chosen from these lists using a random selection process to minimize selection bias and ensure representative participation. Prior to data collection, all students and esteemed authority were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The distribution of participants by school and grade is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The distribution of participants by school and grade

School Name	Type	Number of the students		Total Students
		Grade IX	Grade X	
Jahanara Israel School & College	English Version	7	8	15
Adventist International Mission School	English Version	7	8	15
Nooria Secondary School	Bangla Version	15	15	30

Data Collection Techniques

The researcher collected data through a structured questionnaire developed with reference to established studies on language-in-education policy and English learning (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Nation, 2003). The instrument was adapted to the Bangladeshi secondary school context and consisted of two main sections: demographic information (age, gender, school type, grade level, socio-economic background, and home language) and research-focused items addressing access to English education, language perceptions, socio-economic disparities, curricular concerns, and experiences with English-medium instruction.

Most items used a five-point Likert scale, and a few open-ended questions offered additional qualitative insights. Content validity was ensured through expert review by two ELT (English Language Teaching) specialists, whose feedback improved the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire items.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using a systematic statistical approach using Microsoft Excel (Spreadsheet Software) to generate a clear and comprehensive understanding of students' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. All Likert-scale responses were numerically coded and processed to calculate frequencies and percentages, allowing the researcher to observe how students from English-version and Bangla-version schools distributed their responses across the scale. Measures such as means were used to determine the general level of agreement or disagreement for each item, while standard deviations were examined to understand the extent of variation within each group. These analyses helped reveal important patterns related to students' access to English education, their perceptions of the role of English and Bangla, and the influence of socio-economic and curricular factors.

In addition to the quantitative analysis, student responses from the open-ended questions were reviewed carefully to identify recurring ideas, concerns, and experiences. This thematic examination offered meaningful contextual insights that complemented the numerical findings, resulting in a more holistic understanding of how students navigate English language learning within the educational landscape of Barishal.

Results

The questionnaire investigated students' perceptions regarding English education across Bangla- and English-version schools in Barishal. Findings showed clear differences between the two groups in terms of access, perception, and equity.

Among Bangla-version students (N = 30), the overall agreement rate across items was 67.5% (SD = 22.7), indicating moderately positive attitudes but notable variation. The highest agreement was recorded for the statements "English is more important than Bangla for future career

opportunities” (96.7%) and “Bangla-medium schools need more support to strengthen English instruction” (90%). Conversely, low agreement appeared for items on institutional support (30%) and equal opportunity in the curriculum (26.7%), suggesting perceived inequality and insufficient resources.

For English-version students ($N = 30$), the overall agreement averaged 78.1% ($SD = 16.7$), reflecting stronger and more consistent positive attitudes. All respondents agreed that “English is more important than Bangla for future careers” (100%), while 96.7% supported equal access to English resources. However, only 43.3% agreed that “English-medium schools contribute to social inequality,” and 56.7% felt the curriculum ensures equal opportunity.

Overall, both groups recognized the career importance of English and the need to reduce disparities between mediums. Yet, concerns about fairness and curriculum equity remain, emphasizing the necessity for balanced policy and curriculum reforms that address socio-economic gaps in English education. Although the questionnaire included 18 items, eight items were selected for detailed analysis and reporting, as they most comprehensively represented the central themes and research objectives of the study.

Table 2. Comparison of Students’ Responses Across Bangla- and English-Version Schools

Item No.	Statement (abridged)	% Agree (Bangla)	% Agree (English)	Interpretation
1	I have sufficient access to English learning materials.	60.0	93.3	English-version students report far greater access.
2	My school provides adequate support for English learning.	30.0	83.3	Institutional support stronger in English-version schools.
4	English is more important than Bangla for career opportunities.	96.7	100.0	Both groups strongly value English for career success.
5	Proficiency in Bangla is equally important for academic success.	86.7	70.0	Bangla-version students value bilingual balance more.
10	Access to English resources should be equal for all students.	76.7	96.7	Shared support for equity; stronger among English group.
13	Bangla-medium schools need more support to strengthen English instruction.	90.0	96.7	Both groups recognize policy gaps in English provision.
15	English- and Bangla-medium schools should collaborate to reduce disparities.	96.7	73.3	Strong consensus for collaboration and reform.
18	The curriculum provides equal opportunities for all socio-economic groups.	26.7	56.7	Both groups perceive inequality in curriculum.

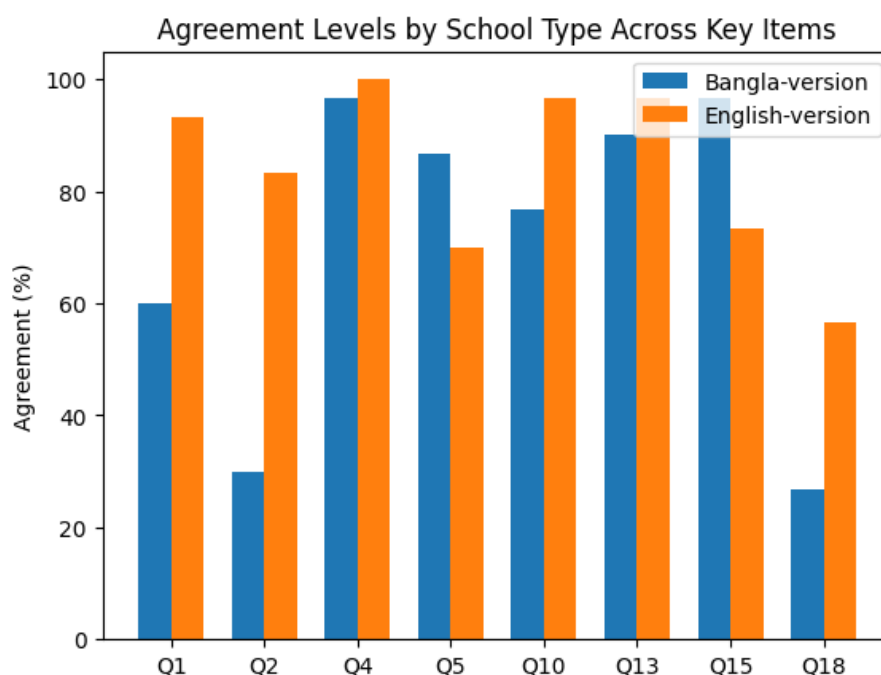


Figure 1. Comparison of Agreement Levels Between Bangla- and English-Version Students

Overall Mean % Agree:

- Bangla-version students = 67.5% (SD = 22.7)
- English-version students = 78.1% (SD = 16.7)

Discussion

The findings of this study can be more meaningfully understood when situated within the broader framework of LIEP (language-in-education policy) in Bangladesh. Although Bangla holds constitutional and symbolic primacy as the national language, English continues to function as a form of linguistic capital that shapes access to educational resources and future opportunities. The significantly higher levels of access to English materials and institutional support reported by English-version students reflect how policy implementation, rather than policy declaration, creates structural inequalities within the same national curriculum.

From a language policy perspective, this dual-track system exemplifies what Ricento (2021) describes as the *political economy of language*, where language value is unevenly distributed through institutional arrangements. English-version schools operate as policy spaces that implicitly prioritize English proficiency by allocating better-trained teachers, learning materials, and assessment support. In contrast, Bangla-version schools, despite formally adhering to the same curriculum, experience what Phillipson (1992) terms *linguistic marginalization*, where limited access to English instruction restricts students' academic and socio-economic mobility.

The perceptions of Bangla-version students particularly their low agreement regarding institutional support (30%) and curriculum equity (26.7%) align with earlier findings by Maniruzzaman and Haque (2022) and the British Council (2022), which document systemic shortages in teacher preparation and instructional resources in Bangla-medium classrooms. These results suggest that language-in-education policy in Bangladesh reproduces inequality

not through explicit exclusion, but through differential resource allocation and uneven policy enactment.

At the same time, the near-universal recognition of English as essential for future careers across both groups (96.7–100%) highlights the ideological dominance of English within the educational system. This finding resonates with Sultana's (2019) argument that English functions as symbolic and economic capital in Bangladesh, shaping students' aspirations regardless of their institutional context. Even Bangla-version students who face structural disadvantages internalize the market value of English, reinforcing the paradox of valuing a language to which they have unequal access.

Interestingly, English-version students showed lower agreement on statements related to social inequality and curriculum fairness, suggesting a degree of *policy invisibility* among relatively privileged learners. This supports Block's (2022) observation that beneficiaries of neoliberal language policies often perceive unequal systems as neutral or merit-based rather than structurally biased. Such perceptions further complicate efforts toward policy reform, as inequality is not uniformly recognized across stakeholder groups.

However, certain limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. The sample size was relatively small and limited to three secondary schools in Barishal, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to the wider Bangladeshi context. The study relied mainly on self-reported questionnaire data, which may reflect subjective perceptions and response bias. Additionally, only selected questionnaire items were analyzed in detail, and perspectives from teachers or policymakers were not included. Future research employing larger samples and mixed-method approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of language-in-education policy implementation.

Overall, despite having some limitations, the findings illustrate that language-in-education policy in Bangladesh operates less as a neutral educational framework and more as a mechanism that stratifies learners along socio-economic lines. While English proficiency is promoted as a tool for national development and global engagement, unequal access within the national curriculum undermines principles of linguistic justice (De Meulder et al., 2019). Without targeted policy intervention such as redistributing English teaching resources, strengthening teacher training in Bangla-version schools, and ensuring curriculum equity the current system risks perpetuating long-term educational and social inequalities.

Conclusion

The study reveals significant differences in students' perceptions of English education between Bangla- and English-version schools in Barishal. English-version students reported higher access to resources, institutional support, and curriculum relevance, while Bangla-version students highlighted gaps in support and perceived inequities. Despite these differences, both groups recognize the critical role of English for future careers and the need to reduce disparities between school types. These findings underscore the importance of inclusive language-in-education policies, targeted support for Bangla-medium schools, and collaborative approaches to ensure equitable access to quality English instruction. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering both language proficiency and educational fairness in Bangladesh.

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