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RESEARCH PAPER

Commodifying English in Bangladesh's Higher Education: A Critical Political Economy of Private Universities and Language Centres

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how English is commodified in Bangladesh's private universities and language centres, and how regulation and discourse sustain this. Over 110 fee-dependent private universities teach mainly in English, which is marketed as a route to jobs and migration. Access remains class-stratified. A critical qualitative, document-based design grounded in critical realism is adopted. The corpus comprises two policy texts, six purposively sampled institutional web texts and eight news items. Critical policy analysis, critical discourse analysis and framing analysis are applied. Findings are triangulated with published studies. Regulation covers governance and fees but not English provision. Universities gate entry through remedial English without publishing its cost. Language centres sell tiered, discounted packages with unverified outcome claims. News coverage contests prices, not the need to buy English. The University Grants Commission should standardise and publish English-support fees. Language centres need regulation; public bilingual foundation programmes would reduce reliance on purchased English.

KEYWORDS Commodification of English, Linguistic Capital, Neoliberalism, Private Higher Education, Critical Discourse Analysis, Bangladesh

Introduction

English is a paradoxical language in Bangladesh. The Language Movement of 1952 and the introduction of Bangla as the sole state language in the Constitution cannot be separated from the nation's founding narrative. Yet English remains the language of the corporate job market, international scholarship, migration and elite distinction (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007; Imam, 2005). Education policy has swung between Bangla-centred nation building and English-centred human-capital development, creating what Chowdhury and Kabir (2014) call 'language wars' in the school and university system. The medium of instruction is a major conflict in tertiary education, where it now separates the public and private sectors (Hamid et al., 2013; Rahman et al., 2020b).

The private university sector is in the middle of this split. The sector grew rapidly under the Private University Act 1992 and its consolidation through the Private University Act 2010, meeting demand that the public university sector could not meet (Alam et al., 2007). It now includes over 110 approved institutions, funded almost solely by student fees, that typically teach in English and present that option as proof of quality and global relevance (Rahman & Hu, 2025). A commercial industry has sprung up around these universities providing IELTS coaching, spoken-English courses and foundation programmes. They constitute a market of packaged English, priced in English, sold in English.

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The article is not about pedagogy, it's about political economy. The English in Bangladesh literature has already shown Policy inadequacies, and low learning outcomes and classroom practices (Hamid & Erling, 2016; Rahman et al., 2019). Much less has been said about who controls English provision, its cost, how it is regulated, and for whose benefit. When language is a commodity, access is allocated by the ability to pay, and a society's language hierarchy becomes a source of income (Heller, 2010). Since English proficiency already correlates with household income, schooling and urban residence, its commodification would further cement the inequalities that higher education is supposed to eradicate.

The study has three significant aspects. It transfers the critical political economy of language, developed mostly in North American, European and East Asian contexts (Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Park & Wee, 2012; Piller & Cho, 2013), to a postcolonial South Asian context where English has both colonial heritage and present-day economic significance. Empirically, it links three sites that are typically studied separately: national regulation, institutional marketing and public media debate. In practice, it identifies the regulatory gaps that the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the Ministry of Education may fill at a time when the 2010 Act and the sector's non-profit status face public criticism ("Non-profit on paper," 2026).

Literature Review, Conceptual and Theoretical Framework, and Research Gap

The commodification of language under late capitalism

Sociolinguistic scholarship argues that late capitalism has transformed language from a marker of national identity into a measurable and saleable skill. Heller (2010) shows how globalised service and knowledge economies attach exchange value to linguistic competence, so that languages are taught, certified and traded as products. Duchêne and Heller (2012) show how discourses of "pride" (language as heritage) are being supplanted by discourses of "profit" (language as an economic resource). For Park and Wee (2012), the value of English is not inherent but established within international markets, where institutions, employers and testing regimes determine the conditions of its recognition.

These markets have been criticised by scholars. Kubota (2011) discusses 'linguistic instrumentalism', which is the belief that proficiency in English leads to economic gains, and concludes that the link between test scores and work opportunities is far from direct and unconditional. Piller and Cho (2013) show how English-medium instruction (EMI) in South Korea's universities, aimed at boosting competitiveness, served as a neoliberal language policy that sharpened competition and individualised its costs. More recently, Smith (2023) discusses how English knowledge is produced, recontextualised and reproduced in Japanese higher education, favouring students from middle-class households. Holborow (2015) and Block et al. (2012) believe that this condition is naturalized by the neoliberal ideology which transforms the learner into an entrepreneur of the self who is required to invest in English in order to succeed in the labour market. Phillipson (1992) earlier placed the global expansion of English within structural inequalities between centre and periphery, and Piller (2016) defined unequal access to dominant languages as a 'social justice issue'.

Parallels are beginning to appear in South Asian research. Taking Bourdieu's perspective, Sah (2022) argues that EMI in Nepal, India and Pakistan is broadly adopted as linguistic capital and a pathway to economic opportunity, but results in inequalities of region, class, ethnicity and gender. Sah and Karki (2023) illustrate how elite actors in Nepal appropriated English-medium policy for economic and social benefit, marginalising

students with less access to knowledge. This literature shows that commercialisation reconfigures the value of linguistic repertoires, the institutions that certify them, and learners' subjectivities. However, Bangladesh remains relatively unstudied from this angle.

Neoliberal marketisation of higher education

Neoliberalism is a political-economic project that brings market logic into areas where public or professional values previously took precedence (Harvey, 2005), and it has changed how higher education is viewed around the world. Although more institutions are embracing marketisation, a 'true capitalist market' in higher education is impossible because its products are partly public goods and competition is based on positional status, so marketisation tends to exacerbate status hierarchies rather than improve standards (Marginson, 2013). Brown and Carasso (2013) trace how fee reform in England reconfigured universities as commercial actors and students as consumers. Molesworth et al. (2009) demonstrate how this shift leads students to want to 'have' a degree rather than to 'be' learners. Fairclough (1993) observed that universities' public texts were adopting the genres of advertising, a process he termed the marketisation of public discourse, while Ball (2012) traces how transnational policy networks circulate market models across national systems.

In Bangladesh, Kabir (2010) traces neoliberal reform of higher education to externally influenced strategic planning that prioritised cost recovery, private provision and reduced public subsidy. Alam et al. (2007) document the early growth of private universities, their concentration in Dhaka and their near-total dependence on tuition fees. Although the Private University Act 2010 prohibits founders from extracting surplus, recent reporting depicts a sector that is non-profit in law but commercial in practice ("Non-profit on paper," 2026). Rahman and Hu (2025) characterise the resulting shift as a movement from hypernationalism to neoliberalism, in which private universities replaced Bangla-only orientations with English-only policies justified as internationalisation.

English in Bangladesh: policy, practice and inequality

Research on English in Bangladesh has concentrated on language-in-education policy and learning outcomes. Hossain and Tollefson (2007) and Imam (2005) show how post-independence Bangla nationalism displaced English from public education, while an English-medium school sector serving affluent families expanded largely beyond state regulation. Hamid and Erling (2016) characterise English-in-education policy as aspirational but weakly implemented, and Rahman et al. (2019) report that years of compulsory English instruction leave many learners with limited functional proficiency. Chowdhury and Kabir (2014) relate these patterns to a stratified school system in which English-medium, English-version, Bangla-medium and madrasa streams produce unequal linguistic resources. Ali and Hamid (2026) show that employability discourses in national English textbooks clash with students' class-based aspirations, demonstrating how neoliberal ideals are refracted through social class.

At the tertiary level, Hamid et al. (2013) found that official English-only policy at a private university coexisted with extensive classroom use of Bangla and reinforced an institutional divide between sectors. Subsequent studies document distinct medium-of-instruction ideologies in public and private universities (Rahman et al., 2020b), the ideological and managerial foundations of English-medium instruction in private institutions (Rahman & Singh, 2020; Rahman et al., 2020a), and the unresolved question of whether Bangla, English or both should serve as the medium of higher education (Karim et al., 2023). Rahman and Singh (2022) show that teachers and students in English-medium

STEM programmes routinely translanguage to construct content knowledge. Erling et al. (2012) found that, even in rural Bangladesh, English was widely associated with economic opportunity. What this literature has not done systematically is to examine English provision as an industry, with its own ownership structures, pricing, marketing and regulation.

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates three theoretical lenses, each addressing a different level of the phenomenon.

Bourdieu's linguistic capital and symbolic power. Bourdieu (1977, 1991) conceptualises linguistic exchange as taking place within markets in which certain ways of speaking are recognised as legitimate and therefore yield a "profit of distinction". Linguistic capital, a form of cultural capital, can under specific conditions be converted into economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Its value depends on rules of recognition that dominant groups set, and which seem natural because they are imposed and disguised as legitimate. The linguistic dispositions of disadvantaged families are neglected, while success in schools and universities is attributed to individual merit (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In Bangladesh, this lens helps explain why English signifies distinction and why its uneven distribution is misrecognised as a difference in effort.

The critical political economy of language. While Bourdieu's work describes the symbolic value of English, the political economy of language describes its material organisation. It examines who produces linguistic goods, who benefits from them, and how states and markets regulate access to them (Block et al., 2012; Heller, 2010; Holborow, 2015). It focuses on ownership, fees, labour and regulation, from the classroom to the institutional and policy levels.

Neoliberalism and the marketisation of higher education. The third lens is macro-political, specifying the conditions under which commodification becomes normalised. Neoliberal governance has shifted responsibility for education from the state to individuals and markets, created competition between providers and redefined learners as consumers investing in their employability (Harvey, 2005; Marginson, 2013; Molesworth et al., 2009). It explains why the state allows private delivery of English courses without regulating them.

The lenses are complementary: neoliberalism describes the enabling conditions, political economy the structures of provision and profit, and Bourdieu the symbolic mechanisms that render those structures legitimate.

Conceptual framework

Consistent with critical realism, the conceptual framework links six constructs in a causal-explanatory chain. Neoliberal *institutional marketisation* creates the structural conditions for *English commodification*, in which universities and language centres price and sell English. Commodification is legitimised by discourses that equate English with linguistic capital and employability and that promise social mobility. Because access to purchased English is uneven, these promises are realised unevenly, reproducing the socioeconomic inequality that in turn generates demand. Table 1 shows how each construct is operationalised.

Table 1
Conceptual framework: constructs, theoretical anchors and documentary indicators

Construct	Theoretical anchor	Documentary indicators
Institutional marketisation	Neoliberalism in higher education	Fee autonomy, tuition dependence, competitive positioning, deregulation
English commodification	Political economy of language	Priced English products, bundled courses, test preparation, certification
Linguistic capital	Bourdieu	English as distinction and legitimacy; placement and remediation thresholds
Employability	Neoliberalism; human-capital discourse	Job promises, employer references, outcome claims
Social mobility	Bourdieu; political economy	Study abroad, migration and status-change narratives
Socioeconomic inequality	Bourdieu; linguistic justice	Fee barriers, price tiers, schooling-stream disadvantage

Three gaps emerge. First, studies of English in Bangladesh have focused on policy and pedagogical issues, rarely on the commercial industry. Second, international research on language commodification has largely overlooked postcolonial South Asian contexts, where English is a colonial legacy, a point of contention and a globally priced asset. Third, there has been little analysis of how policy, institutions and media interact to produce and legitimise a market in English. This article responds by bringing together Bourdieusian, political-economic and neoliberal-governance views and applying them to three levels of documentary evidence. It highlights how regulatory inaction, institutional gatekeeping, commercial marketing and media framing turn an unequally distributed language into a source of private revenue.

Material and Methods

Research philosophy and design

This study applies a critical paradigm integrating critical realism and critical theory. Critical realism assumes that social reality has its own modus operandi (real structures and causal mechanisms), separate from how social actors describe it and only partially captured in their descriptions (Bhaskar, 2008); market structures, regulatory arrangements and class relations are treated here as such mechanisms. Critical theory adds an emancipatory orientation: inquiry aims not only to explain but also to reveal relations of domination and possibilities for change. Fairclough et al. (2002) see critical realism and critical discourse analysis as complementary, since discourse is both shaped by and constitutive of social structures. This justifies treating documents as material traces of power, ownership and inequality rather than as neutral records.

The study is a critical policy analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and media framing analysis, which are informed by political economy of education and driven by neoliberal marketisation theory and Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital. Document analysis suits the examination of policy intent, institutional discourse and public debate because documents are stable, non-reactive and publicly accessible (Bowen, 2009). Each method addresses a distinct research question, and their combination permits triangulation across levels of social organisation (Table 2).

Table 2.
Data sources and methods

Level	Data source	Method	Theoretical lens
Macro: state regulation	Private University Act 2010; National Education Policy 2010	Critical policy analysis	Neoliberalism; political economy

Meso: institutional and commercial provision	Web texts of three private universities and three commercial language centres	CDA (Fairclough's three-dimensional model)	Bourdieu; political economy
Societal: public debate	Eight news reports, opinion pieces and letters (2018–2026)	Framing and thematic analysis	Neoliberalism; Bourdieu
Cross-level synthesis	All of the above, with published empirical studies	Triangulated interpretation	All three

Sampling and corpus

Purposive sampling was used throughout, because the aim is analytic depth rather than statistical representativeness. All corpus texts were retrieved from publicly accessible websites in November 2026 and are listed with their identifiers in Appendix A.

Policy corpus. The Private University Act 2010 and the National Education Policy 2010 were analysed in full as the two principal national texts governing private higher education and the language of instruction.

Institutional and commercial corpus. A maximum-variation sample of six web texts was selected. Three come from private universities: the pre-university English programme page of BRAC University's language institute (I1), the brochure of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh's Center for Language Studies (I2), and an East West University news page promoting its English department (I3). Three come from commercial providers of IELTS and spoken-English courses in Dhaka, varying in scale and orientation: a study-abroad consultancy with an integrated training wing (L1), an online and campus-based IELTS academy (L2), and an IELTS and study-abroad centre (L3). Texts were chosen because they describe English provision directly, rather than general admissions.

Media corpus. The keywords used were English, IELTS, communication skills, coaching, private university, tuition fees, employability, and using these keywords eight articles published 2018-2026 from four English language outlets (The Daily Star, The Financial Express, The Daily Observer and Dhaka Courier) were identified. The corpus is carefully designed to include news text, opinion pieces and letters to reflect institutions and citizen voices (M1-M8).

Data analysis

Critical policy analysis. Policy was treated both as text and as discourse that limits thinking and doing (Ball, 1993). Each document was analysed for what it regulates, what it leaves to institutional discretion and what it ignores; silences are analytically significant because what regulation leaves unregulated creates space for markets to operate.

Critical discourse analysis. Fairclough's (1992, 2003) three-dimensional model guided analysis of the institutional and commercial texts. At the level of text, vocabulary, evaluation, modality, numerical claims and reader positioning were considered. At the level of discursive practice, the analysis focused on genre mixing, specifically of academic information and advertising (Fairclough, 1993), and intertextual links with migration and corporate discourses. At the level of *social practice*, textual features were interpreted in relation to the political economy of the sector and the distribution of linguistic capital.

Media framing analysis. Following Entman (1993), frames were identified through how each item defines a problem, attributes causes, offers moral evaluations and proposes

remedies. Thematic coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases, combining deductive codes from the conceptual framework with inductive codes.

All strands used the shared coding frame in Table 3.

Table 3
Deductive coding frame

Code	Definition	Indicative textual realisations
Market good	English presented as a product with a price, package or discount	Price lists, bundles, limited-time offers, tiered packages
Employability	English linked to jobs, careers or employers	Employer needs, skill gaps, workplace language
Distinction	English linked to prestige, refinement or legitimacy	Rankings, "best" claims, premium tiers
Mobility and migration	English linked to study abroad or migration	Visa rates, IELTS targets, overseas offices
Deficit and gatekeeping	Learners framed as lacking; access conditioned on English	Placement thresholds, remedial prerequisites, Bangla-medium background
Regulation and silence	What texts specify, delegate or omit	Fee clauses, medium-of-instruction clauses, absent fee disclosure
Equity and justice	Access, cost, exclusion or fairness	Affordability, class divides, exploitation

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Rigour was based on credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For credibility, data sources (policy, institutional, commercial and media texts), methods and theories were triangulated, and the documentary findings were compared with published empirical studies of higher education in Bangladesh. Dependability was supported by a corpus register recording each text's source, date and access route, the coding frame and an audit trail of analytic memos. Confirmability was supported by reporting textual evidence. For reflexivity, it was recognised that critical analysis cannot be neutral, and efforts were made to find disconfirming evidence, such as texts that discussed English in non-commercial terms.

Ethical considerations and scope of inference

Because the study was conducted using only public documents, there was little risk to human subjects. Institutions and businesses were considered public actors, whose promotional texts are directed towards the public, and quotations used are limited and the analysis is centred on the discursive patterns rather than on the behaviour of named individuals. The documents reflect the statements of institutions and media, but not the experiences of students. Therefore the study does not seek statistical generalisation but rather an analytic generalisation, to uncover the mechanisms of commodification and legitimation of English.

Results and Discussion

Regulation through silence: the state as market-maker

The Private University Act 2010 is primarily a governance statute. It specifies the composition and authority of a Board of Trustees, a Syndicate, an Academic Council and its committees; mandates that institutions operate as non-profit trusts from which founders cannot claim any surplus; and establishes an independent accreditation body (Government of Bangladesh, 2010). On fees, it requires that they match the country's socio-economic conditions and cover reasonable operating costs, and leaves fee-setting to institutions under UGC oversight. The Act gives regulators little power to examine the cost of

education, and they have acknowledged that the sector is essentially market-based ("Non-profit on paper," 2026).

The Act does not mention the language of instruction, minimum requirements for foundation and remedial English courses, or their costs. The National Education Policy 2010 still recognises English as a medium of higher education alongside Bangla and states that scholarly material should be translated into Bangla (Ministry of Education, 2010). It does not consider who should pay for the English proficiency that English-medium learning presupposes, nor does it mention commercial language provision. Commercial language centres are thus completely outside the regulatory framework of higher education. This aligns with Rahman and Hu's (2025) finding that private universities have considerable interpretative discretion regarding national language policy.

This is not a neutral pattern from the prism of theory. Silence, for critical policy analysis, is a policy choice (Ball, 1993). The state controls the governance and the overall fee level but not the language requirement of study so that the English language can be sold as a standalone product in universities and in the market. This is indicative of Kabir (2010) who characterizes a 'neoliberal settlement' in which the state formally controls while also placing responsibility for higher education onto households. The state in political-economic terms is more of a provider of market capital than of linguistic capital; it is a provider of the right to sell linguistic capital. It does not change because private universities are non-profit: Private universities compete for fee income even if there is no surplus, and English is at the heart of the private university, in its capacity as a medium and remedial service.

Gatekeeping and branding: English in institutional and commercial texts

The institutional and commercial texts reveal two distinct modes of commodification (Table 4).

Table 4
Dominant codes in the institutional and commercial corpus

Text	Provider type	Dominant codes	Price disclosed
I1	University language institute	Deficit and gatekeeping; academic success	No
I2	University language centre	Deficit and gatekeeping; employability; international standards	No
I3	University news page	Distinction	Not applicable
L1	Study-abroad consultancy with training wing	Market good; mobility and migration	Yes
L2	IELTS academy	Market good; distinction; mobility and migration	Yes
L3	IELTS and study-abroad centre	Mobility and migration; outcome claims	No

Universities: commodification through gatekeeping. Contrary to the expectation that universities would sell English in overtly promotional language, the university texts frame English chiefly as an academic necessity. I1 describes a twelve-week intensive programme for applicants who perform well in their discipline on the admission test but require stronger English, noting that many participants come from Bangla-medium backgrounds, and states its aim as producing successful students who are independent learners and critical thinkers. I2 describes a sequence beginning with a non-credit remedial course for students who score below a set threshold on the admission-test writing section; passing it is a prerequisite for the first credit-bearing English course. The brochure frames its work in terms of preparing students "to cope with their university courses" and links it

to international standards and to employers' language needs. Neither text discloses what the courses cost. I3, by contrast, asserts that its English department is the best among private universities but offers no ranking data or graduate outcomes to support the claim.

These texts are significant less for what they advertise than for what they institutionalise. Placement thresholds convert schooling-stream background into an additional, prerequisite stage of study. In Bourdieusian terms, the admission test functions as an instrument of recognition: it certifies the English of students from English-medium schooling as legitimate and designates that of Bangla-medium students as deficient (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Because tuition in the sector is charged per course or credit, and the remedial stage lengthens the route to a degree, the cost of acquiring legitimate linguistic capital falls on those who arrive with the least of it. The absence of published prices for these courses compounds the inequity, since students cannot know in advance what their own remediation will cost.

Language centres: commodification through marketing. The commercial texts display the full genre of advertising that Fairclough (1993) identified. L1 publishes a price list in which IELTS courses range from BDT 9,500 for a crash course to BDT 13,800 for a regular course, and offers a bundled package of IELTS, spoken English and grammar at BDT 19,900, shown against a crossed-out price of BDT 29,440 with a deadline for the discount. The L1 page incorporates training and an "Apply to Study Abroad" module as well as an overseas office. At L2, there are seven courses to choose from, under a banner of 40% off all courses, from a BDT 6,000 crash course to a BDT 50,000 "V.I.P IELTS" course. It shows an average band score of 7.5 and a success rate of 95%, but does not provide information on how these were determined. L3 does not report any information about methodology, but its prices are not published and its average among the best students is 8.0+ and its visa success rate for study-abroad clients is 85%. None of the three texts makes a flat claim; all qualify their claims as averages or rates, as promises that are not guaranteed.

The three features that stand out are: First, English is explicitly priced, bundled and discounted, the key elements of a commodity (Heller, 2010). Secondly, there is a hierarchy of tiers at L2 that offers increasing tiers of distinction at increasingly higher prices, with the highest ("VIP") tier being eight times the price of the lowest. Third, numbers for bands and visas are indicators of hope and give numbers a power that they do not possess, and assert promises which cannot be guaranteed. The predominance of the Mobility and migration code, however, suggests that commercial English is more often sold as an exit route than an entry route into the domestic labour market, which is in line with the findings of Park and Wee (2012) that test regimes determine the value of English.

Educational consumerism and the employability promise

Across the corpus, employability operates as the moral justification for purchasing English, yet the evidence supporting it is thin. University texts invoke employers' language needs without reporting graduate outcomes, and commercial texts substitute band scores and visa rates for evidence of learning. Molesworth et al. (2009) show that marketised higher education encourages students to treat qualifications as possessions purchased for exchange value. Kubota (2011) cautions that the economic returns to English depend on gender, sector, networks and other forms of capital and are often overstated. Ali and Hamid (2026) add that in Bangladesh, employability discourses clash with students' class-based career aspirations, so that the promise of English is itself refracted through class. When promised returns fail to materialise, failure is attributed to the learner rather than to the market that sold the promise, an individualisation of risk characteristic of neoliberal language regimes (Holborow, 2015; Piller & Cho, 2013).

Media framing of English and its commercial provision

Table 5

Frames in the media corpus (n = 8)

Frame	Items	Problem definition	Attributed cause	Proposed remedy
Skills deficit	M1, M3, M4	Graduates lack English and communication skills	Teaching methods, curricula, teachers, students' priorities	More and better English; enforcement of English-medium teaching; industry–academia links
Accountability	M6, M7, M8	Commercialisation of private universities and coaching centres	Profit motives; weak oversight	Regulation by the Ministry of Education and UGC
Critical equity	M2, M5	English as a colonial legacy and class divider	History of colonial rule; English-medium schooling	Recognition of other languages; value of Bangla in higher education

The *skills-deficit* frame was the most common. M3 reports a policy-institute study in which employers identified a mismatch between graduates' performance and their preferences in soft skills, including English. M4 quotes an industry leader attributing weak communication partly to graduates who prioritise money over learning. M1 calls for compulsory, assessed interactive work and for university leaders to monitor that lectures are delivered in English. None of these items mentions fees, private provision or inequality: the necessity of English is taken as given, and the remedy is more of it.

The 'accountability' frame directly threatens commercialisation. M7 reports that regulators' ability to control private university fees and other charges is limited, and M8 reports a proposed amendment to the 2010 Act to include academics on trustee boards. In a letter to the editor, M6 condemns the IELTS and PTE coaching centres as a "business driven by exploitation rather than education" and says that there needs to be a regulation on language training institutes by the Ministry of Education on the fees for mock-test portals. However, even in this context it is the cost and provision rather than the need to buy English that are examined.

The critical-equity items question the standing of English. M2 argues that colonial history was the reason of English dominance and states that the ads that have been placed all across Dhaka guarantee that English will be improved in a quick time, whereas M5 states that the upper-class students belong to English medium schools, while the lower-class students were struggling with the language of higher education. These are both features and columns, not news reports. This distribution is consistent with the theoretical expectation that comes from Bourdieu, namely that the value of English should be linked to doxa, which is an assumption that is accepted and not debated in the mainstream thought. Media, who will profit more from English than why it is to be purchased, contests.

Class, inequality and linguistic justice

Synthesising across levels, the analysis shows cumulative advantage operating through three interrelated processes. First, regulation is silent on the cost of English support, which is neither regulated nor disclosed (Section 4.1). Second, universities transform schooling background into differential pathways of admission and remediation, while language centres trade English in segmented packages, with premium options reserved for higher-priced tiers (Section 4.2). Third, mainstream media naturalise the need for English and challenge only its cost (Section 4.4). Hence, students from English-medium schools enter with the linguistic capital that institutions reward, acquired through family investment (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014; Imam, 2005), while students from Bangla-medium,

rural or madrasa schools must buy it. The linguistic hierarchy that disadvantages them becomes a source of institutional and commercial revenue: an unequal distribution of cultural capital is converted into a market (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Heller, 2010).

The results echo South Asian findings that market-led English policies benefit elites and marginalise others (Sah, 2022; Sah & Karki, 2023), and Japanese findings that neoliberal English policies benefit middle-class students (Smith, 2023). They also reveal a distinctly Bangladeshi structure: a non-profit legal status operating alongside fee-driven competition, and a commercial sector geared toward migration. Because public universities and the National University system operate largely in Bangla, stratification by medium of instruction becomes stratification of labour-market and migration access (Hamid et al., 2013; Rahman et al., 2020b). Aspiration to English is widespread even among the rural poor (Erling et al., 2012); what is lacking is fair access. Linguistic justice, understood as fair access to the languages on which life chances depend (Piller, 2016), requires treating English for higher education as a public responsibility rather than a private purchase, while recognising Bangla as an academic resource, as translanguaging research in Bangladeshi classrooms already demonstrates (Rahman & Singh, 2022).

Conclusion

This article has shown that English in Bangladesh's private higher education is not merely a medium of instruction but a commodity, produced and priced within a market that the state has enabled and largely left unregulated. The Private University Act 2010 and the National Education Policy 2010 regulate governance and the general level of fees but are silent on the provision and pricing of English, and commercial language centres lie outside the higher-education framework. Universities frame English academically, but it also functions as a gate, through placement criteria and remedial conditions whose costs are not disclosed. Language centres sell English directly through price lists, bundles, discounts, premium levels and unverifiable, migration-focused outcome measures. News coverage focuses primarily on English as a skill and, where it criticises commercialisation, questions prices and behaviour, not the need to purchase English.

This study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it combines Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital and symbolic power with the critical political economy of language and theories of university marketisation, and differentiates two modes of commodification: gatekeeping in universities and marketing in commercial centres. Contextually, it extends language commodification studies to a postcolonial South Asian context where English is a colonial legacy, a nationalist issue and a globally sold commodity. Methodologically, it provides a replicable multi-level, document-based design connecting regulation, institutional provision and media framing.

The study has limitations. Claims in documents are not lived practice, so they will not show what students will pay or achieve. The institutional and media corpora are small and purposive, comprising of English language web texts and newspapers, whereas Bangla language media and social-media marketing were not considered and only one analyst was involved in analysis. There is a need for future studies to augment the corpora, include Bangla sources, incorporate independent second coding, and include documentary analysis, student spending surveys, interviews with administrators and language-centre owners, and graduate tracer studies.

Recommendations

The following recommendations draw on Section 4.1 (regulatory silence), Section 4.2 (gatekeeping and marketing practices) and Section 4.5 (equity mechanism).

For policymakers and the Ministry of Education

- Recognise English for higher education as a public responsibility, and provide foundation English programmes through public universities and colleges, open to all admitted students.
- Overhaul the National Education Policy to establish a clear medium-of-instruction policy for higher education that encourages bilingual (Bangla–English) education rather than relying on market positioning.
- Introduce a proportionate regulatory regime for commercial language centres covering registration, fee disclosure and honest advertising, including how claims about band scores, success rates and visa rates were calculated.

For the University Grants Commission

- Require private universities to publish complete fee schedules, including charges for remedial and foundation English, and make them available centrally in a comparable format.
- Issue minimum standards for English-language support covering staff qualifications, placement-test transparency and limits on charging for remediation required as a condition of study.
- Require outcome claims in promotional materials to be substantiated with published graduate-outcome data, and incorporate language support into accreditation criteria.

For private universities

- Treat English support as a core academic service rather than a revenue stream, and offer needs-based waivers for remedial courses taken by students from Bangla-medium, rural and madrasa backgrounds.
- Adopt translanguaging and bilingual pedagogies that recognise Bangla as an academic resource (Karim et al., 2023; Rahman & Singh, 2022).
- Publish placement criteria, remedial pathways and their costs before admission so that applicants can make informed decisions.

For commercial language centres

- Disclose total course costs, refund conditions and instructor qualifications, and avoid unverifiable outcome metrics.
- Offer graduated pricing or community-access places to widen participation beyond affluent urban learners.

Declarations

Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Ethical Considerations

No human subjects or personal information was used in this study. It is based exclusively on published books that are accessible to the public (and publisher descriptions and epitexts) cited in the references. Ethical approval was not necessary.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI (ChatGpt and Grammarly) was used for language editing and condensing text. It was not used for the data collection, coding the corpus and drawing findings. All text generated by AI is reviewed and edited by the author, and the author is responsible for the article's content.

Data Availability Statement

The data analysed are all published data, as mentioned in the references. The 39 corpus books are listed verifying, with the verification sources. The coding frame and coded dataset are available on reasonable request from the author.

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