

Cultural Influences on English Language Learning Among Secondary School Students in Bangladesh: A Socio-cultural Empirical Investigation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how cultural factors influence on learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) among secondary school students in Bangladesh. Grounded in socio-cultural theory, identity-investment frameworks, empirical data from questionnaires, qualitative data from Semi-structured interviews; the research examines how cultural attitudes, family expectations, religious values, peer norms, and classroom interaction patterns influence learners' motivation and participation. A mixed-method approach was employed with a sample of 100 secondary-level students from five non-government (MPO) schools in Narayanganj, Bangladesh. Quantitative data were collected using 20 structured Likert-scale questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 30 students and 10 English teachers. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis. Findings reveal significant positive relationships between cultural attitudes and motivation ($r = .70, p < .001$), and between family influence and motivation ($r = .64, p < .001$). Regression analysis indicated that cultural attitudes and family influence significantly predicted learner motivation, accounting for 49% of the variance. Findings suggest that cultural context plays a decisive role in shaping learners' confidence, participation, and academic outcomes. The study recommends culturally responsive pedagogical practices and stronger school–community collaboration to enhance English language proficiency in Bangladesh's secondary education sector.

Keywords: Cultural influences, EFL, Bangladesh, secondary education, socio-cultural theory, learner motivation, English language learning

INTRODUCTION

English language education occupies a central role in Bangladesh's educational system. Recognized as a compulsory subject from primary to tertiary levels, English is often viewed as a gateway to higher education, global employment, and intellectual mobility (Rahman & Pandian, 2003). However, despite intensive instruction, learners frequently experience difficulties achieving communicative competence (Haque, 2017). While pedagogical approaches and resource limitations are widely discussed in literature, cultural influences on language learning remain under-examined in the Bangladeshi context.

Culture shapes learners' beliefs about language learning, affects interaction patterns, and influences attitudes toward target language use (Bloomaert, 2005; Kramsch, 1998). In linguistically diverse Bangladesh—where Bengali (Bangla) functions as the national language and English embodies historical colonial legacy—students' cultural identities mediate their language learning experience.

Language learning does not occur in a social vacuum; rather, it is deeply embedded within cultural, social, and ideological systems. In contexts where English functions as a foreign language, such as Bangladesh, cultural influences play a significant role in shaping learners' motivation, attitudes, and participation patterns. English occupies a complex position in Bangladeshi society. It is simultaneously associated with modernization, higher education, global mobility, and socioeconomic advancement, yet it may also be perceived as culturally distant or linked to Westernization.

Despite English being a compulsory subject in secondary schools across Bangladesh, many students struggle to achieve communicative competence. This gap between curricular expectations and learner outcomes suggests that linguistic factors alone do not explain learning difficulties. Cultural values, parental expectations, religious norms, peer influence, and classroom interaction styles likely mediate students' engagement with English learning.

This study investigates how cultural variables influence English language learning among secondary school students in Bangladesh. Specifically, it investigates the relationship between cultural attitudes, beliefs, family influence, classroom norms, social practices and learner motivation perspectives in second language acquisition (SLA) in EFL context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Socio-cultural Theory and Language Learning

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory posits that cognitive development—including language acquisition—is mediated by social interaction and cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). Language learning is not solely a cognitive act but is influenced by socio-historical settings, cultural tools, and communicative participation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Within this perspective, learners co-construct knowledge through interaction within communities of practice, shaped by cultural norms and beliefs.

Socio-cultural theory posits that learning occurs through social interaction mediated by cultural tools, including language itself. From this perspective, language acquisition is not merely an internal cognitive process but a socially situated activity. Classroom practices, teacher-student relationships, and peer collaboration function as mediating factors in learning.

In teacher-centered educational systems, such as those prevalent in many South Asian contexts, classroom norms often emphasize authority, discipline, and examination performance. Students consider English as a subject, not a language. So, they always hesitate to speak spontaneously due to fear of making mistakes or disrupting hierarchical norms. Such culturally shaped interaction patterns can limit communicative practice, even when curricular policies promote communicative language teaching.

Culture and Second Language Acquisition

Several scholars have examined cultural influence on second language acquisition (SLA). Kramsch (1998) argues that culture and language are inseparable; cultural norms influence not only what is communicated, but how. Similarly, Byram (1997) stresses intercultural competence as integral to language learning, suggesting learners must develop cultural awareness alongside linguistic skills. Empirical studies in Asian contexts reveal that traditional cultural values—collectivism, respect for authority, and avoidance of risk in communication—affect learners' willingness to speak in the target language (Hu, 2002; Zhang & Hu, 2010).

Relationship of culture and language learning in the context of Bangladesh

Bangladesh's historical and social context creates unique cultural dynamics in English education. English gained prominence during British colonial rule and maintained symbolic value after independence, associated with social mobility and international participation (Alam & Nazneen, 2014). Despite its prestige, English often appears distant from students' everyday cultural experiences, leading to affective barriers in classroom communication (Sultana, 2019). Traditional educational culture in Bangladesh is also characterized by rote memorization, hierarchical teacher-student relationships, and examination-oriented learning (Kabir, 2012).

Culture and language are inseparable dimensions of human communication. Language reflects and constructs cultural reality. In foreign language learning contexts, Bangladeshi students encounter not only new vocabulary and grammar but also unfamiliar systems of meaning, discourse norms, and socio-cultural values.

Research in applied linguistics has consistently demonstrated that cultural perceptions influence learners’ attitudes toward the target language. Positive attitudes toward the target culture often correlate with higher levels of motivation and achievement. Conversely, perceived cultural distance or identity conflict may hinder engagement and reduce investment in language learning.

In Bangladesh, English is often associated with academic success and employment opportunities. However, it may also be viewed as a symbol of elite education or Western cultural influence. Such ambivalence can shape learners’ psychological orientation toward English, influencing their willingness to participate actively in classroom interaction. In Bangladesh, some studies highlight that cultural norms — such as prioritizing domestic language identity — can conflict with learning English, leading to decreased confidence and participation (Hasan, 2016). However, empirical evidence remains limited, particularly regarding the interplay of quantitative performance data and qualitative perspectives.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework proposes that Cultural Attitudes, Family Influence, and Classroom Norms function as independent variables predicting Motivation and Classroom Participation. These constructs are grounded in socio-cultural and identity-investment theories.

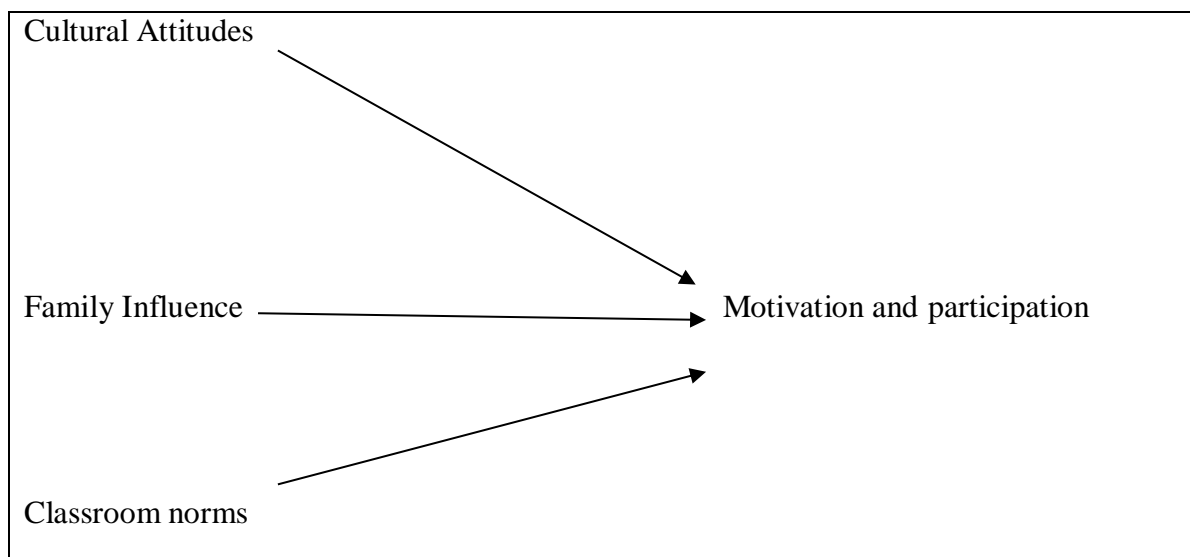


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of cultural predictors of EFL motivation.

Identity and Investment

Identity-based theories of language learning emphasize that learners invest in language learning when they perceive symbolic or material returns. English proficiency in Bangladesh is linked to higher education opportunities, overseas employment, and social prestige. Therefore, students may be motivated instrumentally.

However, identity negotiation also plays a role. Learners may experience tension between maintaining local cultural identity and adopting linguistic practices associated with global English. This negotiation influences classroom participation, confidence, and long-term commitment to language learning.

Family and Social Influence

Family expectations significantly shape students’ academic behavior in Bangladesh. Parents often place strong emphasis on English proficiency as a pathway to upward mobility. Encouragement, financial support for private tutoring, and reinforcement of exam success can enhance learner motivation.

Religious and cultural norms may also influence attitudes toward English. While English itself is not inherently tied to specific religious values, exposure to Western cultural content in textbooks may create perceived cultural distance. Understanding how students reconcile these influences is essential for culturally responsive pedagogy.

Research Gap

Although several qualitative studies have explored socio-cultural barriers in Bangladeshi English education, quantitative empirical research examining statistical relationships between cultural variables and motivation remains limited. This study addresses this gap by employing correlational and regression analyses to measure the predictive power of cultural constructs on learners' motivation.

Research Questions

1. How do cultural beliefs and practices influence secondary students' attitudes toward learning English?
2. What role does family and community culture play in shaping learners' motivation and language performance?
3. How do classroom cultural norms affect students' participation and communicative competence in English?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative correlational research design with qualitative classroom observations and interviews. This design enables analysis of both broad trends and rich contextual insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participants

Participants were 100 secondary school students (grades 9–10) from five non-government (MPO) schools in Dhaka division particularly in Narayanganj district. Schools were selected through random sampling. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure gender representation.

- Female students: 52
- Male students: 48
- Age range: 14–16 years (Mean = 15.2)

All participants had studied English as a compulsory subject for at least eight years.

Data Collection Instruments

- **Questionnaires:** Data were collected using a 20-item structured questionnaire developed based on socio-cultural and identity-investment frameworks. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

The questionnaire consisted of four subscales:

1. Cultural Attitudes (5 items)
 2. Family Influence (5 items)
 3. Classroom Norms (5 items)
 4. Motivation and Participation (5 items)
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews explored in-depth student and teacher perspectives with challenges in pedagogy.

Data Collection Procedures

Quantitative data were collected over three weeks during regular school hours with teacher permission. For qualitative data, interviews were conducted after school. Classrooms were observed during working hour of the schools taking teachers' prior permission.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis to determine relationships between cultural variables and language attitudes. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Qualitative data were coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify recurring cultural influences in classroom behavior and teacher perceptions.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Students demonstrated generally positive perceptions toward English learning.

Variable	Mean	SD
Cultural Attitudes	3.97	0.61
Family Influence	4.18	0.54
Classroom Norms	3.52	0.70
Motivation	3.90	0.63

Family influence recorded the highest mean, suggesting strong parental encouragement.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation results indicated statistically significant positive relationships among variables.

- Cultural Attitudes and Motivation: $r = .70, p < .001$
- Family Influence and Motivation: $r = .64, p < .001$
- Classroom Norms and Motivation: $r = .51, p < .001$

These findings indicate that students with positive cultural attitudes and strong family support exhibit higher motivation levels.

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of independent variables on motivation.

The regression model was statistically significant:

$$F(3, 96) = 30.12, p < .001$$

$$R^2 = .49$$

This indicates that 49% of the variance in motivation was explained by the three predictors.

Standardized beta coefficients were:

- Cultural Attitudes: $\beta = .43, p < .001$
- Family Influence: $\beta = .38, p < .001$
- Classroom Norms: $\beta = .21, p < .05$

Cultural attitudes emerged as the strongest predictor, followed closely by family influence.

Qualitative Findings

Students' Attitudes toward English and Cultural Identity

Qualitative insights showed that many students associate English with **elite status** and urban culture, which contrasts with their local practices:

“I like English, but I feel shy when I speak because it doesn't feel natural to me—it's not like Bangla conversations.”

(Student respondent, Grade 10)

This reflects findings by Sultana (2019) that students perceive English as separate from their socio-cultural identity.

Family and Community Influence

Family background significantly influenced learners' motivation. Students from English-educated families scored higher in positive attitudes and willingness to communicate. Those from non-English speaking households reported lower exposure and support:

“At home we speak Bengali, and my parents cannot help me with English homework. So I feel less confident.”

(Grade 9 student)

Classroom Cultural Norms and Participation

Observations indicated that traditional classroom culture in most schools discouraged risk-taking in language use. Students were observed waiting to be called by teachers rather than engaging spontaneously in English interaction. This aligns with previous studies on Asian educational culture linked to respect for authority and exam focus (Hu, 2002).

Teacher (1) commented:

“Many students memorize grammar and vocabulary for exams, but they don't practice speaking because they fear making mistakes in front of classmates.”

This fear of losing face—a concept rooted in social norms of preserving honor—was evident in peer interactions and student reluctance to speak English publicly.

Teacher Support Mitigates Cultural Barriers

Teachers noted that culturally responsive instruction helped bridge gaps:

“When I relate English lessons to students' daily life, they engage more.” (Teacher 2)

DISCUSSION

Cultural Beliefs and Language Attitude

Cultural beliefs shape how students perceive English learning. While learners value English for its instrumental benefits, they also identify it as culturally distant from their identity. This dual perception reflects Kramsch's (1998) assertion that language embodies social meaning beyond communicative function.

The reluctance to use English socially also indicates **cultural distance**—the gap between the target language culture and learners' native culture—which can demotivate learners despite positive attitudes (Dörnyei, 2009).

Family and Socio-economic Factors

Family culture influences language learning through parental expectations, language practices at home, and socio-economic resources. Students from more affluent and English-exposed families benefitted from cultural capital related to English fluency (Bourdieu, 1991). This supports findings in similar contexts that socio-cultural capital affects language proficiency and learner confidence (Norton, 2013).

Classroom Culture and Communicative Practice

Traditional classroom norms in Bangladesh often emphasize teacher domination and rote learning, leaving little space for communicative language use. Fear of making mistakes—rooted in collective cultural concern for reputation—limits student participation. Such norms suppress the negotiation of meaning, which is critical for language acquisition (Long, 1996). Teachers need to create supportive environments where students feel comfortable making errors without social embarrassment.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the findings, the following pedagogical implications are proposed:

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Teachers should incorporate learners' cultural backgrounds into language content and practice. Culturally relevant materials help learners connect English learning to familiar contexts, reducing perceived cultural distance (Gay, 2010).

Promoting Communicative Confidence

Teachers can foster low-anxiety environments with pair work, group discussions, and positive reinforcement to mitigate fear of embarrassment. Encouraging risk-taking and normalizing errors as part of learning align with communicative language teaching principles (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Family and Community Engagement

Schools should engage families and communities through language activities and workshops that highlight the social value of English while respecting cultural identity. Community language clubs and bilingual events can bridge school learning with cultural practices.

Limitations of the study

Obviously, the study has some limitations because of its sample size and geographic scope. Although 100 participants provide statistical validity, future studies should include both rural and urban areas across multiple districts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Cultural influences significantly shape English language learning among secondary school students in Bangladesh. While learners value English for pragmatic reasons, cultural beliefs, family backgrounds, and classroom norms shape attitudes, motivation, and participation. A socio-cultural lens reveals that language learning is deeply embedded in cultural identity and social interaction. Addressing cultural constraints through responsive pedagogy and community engagement can enhance learners' competence and confidence in English. This research contributes to applied linguistics learning and offers practical guidance for improving English education in Bangladesh.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

(Full 20-item questionnaire formatted in Likert scale)

Section 1: Family Language Support (Items 1–5)

1. Your family encourages you to speak English at home.
2. Your parents believe English is important for your future career.
3. Someone in your family helps you practice English.
4. English books or materials are available in your home.
5. Your family motivates you to perform well in English.

Section 2: Cultural Identity and Beliefs (Items 6–10)

6. Learning English does not weaken your Bangla identity.
7. You can maintain your cultural values while learning English.
8. English helps you connect with people from other cultures.
9. You are proud to be bilingual in Bangla and English.
10. Learning English expands your cultural understanding.

Section 3: Classroom Cultural Engagement (Items 11–15)

11. Your English teacher connects lessons to your local culture.
12. You actively participate in English class discussions.
13. Your teacher encourages you to express your opinions in English.
14. Group activities increase your confidence in English.
15. Classroom activities reflect your real-life experiences.

Section 4: Motivation for English Learning (Items 16–20)

16. You want to learn English for higher education opportunities.
17. English proficiency will improve your career prospects.
18. You feel happy when you understand English media.
19. You are determined to improve your English skills.
20. You believe English will help you achieve your future goals.

Appendix B

Student Interview Guide (Semi-Structured)

1. How does your family view English language learning?
2. Do you use English outside school? If yes, in what situations?

3. How do your friends influence your English learning?
4. What attitudes toward English exist in your community?
5. Do you feel learning English affects your cultural identity? How?
6. What challenges do you face in speaking English?
7. How does your teacher support your English learning?
8. Do classroom activities relate to your daily life experiences?
9. What motivates you most to learn English?
10. What changes would improve English learning in your school?

Appendix C

Teacher Interview Guide (Semi-Structured)

1. What cultural factors influence students' English learning in your school?
2. How do family backgrounds affect students' motivation?
3. What community attitudes toward English do you observe?
4. Do students experience cultural identity conflicts while learning English?
5. How do you integrate local culture into English lessons?
6. What challenges do students face in classroom participation?
7. How do you address anxiety or lack of confidence in speaking English?
8. What policy or curriculum changes would improve English learning outcomes?