

Translanguaging and Youth Identity: Banglish as a Medium of Expression and Belonging in Urban Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In modern urban Bangladesh, young people increasingly communicate in a blend of Bangla and English, often referred to as Banglish. This linguistic hybridity is more than spontaneous mixing, it represents a form of translanguaging through which youth construct modern, inclusive identities and negotiate a sense of belonging in both local and global contexts. The study focuses on urban youth in Bangladesh and explores how they demonstrate creativity through the use of Banglish across different contexts, including social media, memes and discussions in university settings. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining semi-structured interviews with students and young professionals to uncover social meanings, online surveys to examine language preferences and usage patterns and meme and online conversation analysis to illustrate the role of translanguaging in digital humor and expression. In addition, ethnographic observations of campus conversations show how Banglish functions as a shared communicative code among youth. Situating these findings within existing studies on translanguaging in Bangladesh (e.g., Rafi 2022; Sajib 2019; Ahmed 2023), the research demonstrates how English is reimagined not as a foreign or elite language, but as an integral component of urban youth identity, creativity and community building in contemporary Bangladesh.

Keywords: Banglish, translanguaging, digital humor, language.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary urban Bangladesh, young people increasingly engage in multilingual communicative practices that blur the boundaries between Bangla and English. One of the most visible outcomes of this linguistic interaction is Banglish, a hybrid form that combines elements of both languages in everyday speech, digital communication and informal academic settings. While Banglish is often dismissed in popular discourse as casual code-mixing or linguistic “incorrectness,” its widespread use among urban youth suggests that it plays a more complex social and cultural role. Rather than reflecting linguistic deficiency, Banglish can be understood as a strategic and meaningful form of translanguaging through which young people negotiate identity, creativity and belonging.

Translanguaging, as conceptualized by scholars such as García and Canagarajah, refers to the dynamic and fluid use of linguistic resources that multilingual speakers draw upon to make meaning in specific contexts. From this perspective, language practices like Banglish are not random or deficient but are socially situated, purposeful and identity-driven. For urban youth in Bangladesh, shaped by globalization, English-medium education, digital media and local linguistic traditions, Banglish offers a flexible communicative repertoire that allows them to navigate multiple social worlds simultaneously. Through Banglish, young people align themselves with peer groups, express modern and urban identities and participate in both local and global cultural spaces.

In the Bangladeshi context, English has historically been associated with education, socioeconomic mobility and elite status, while Bangla has been deeply tied to nationalism and cultural identity. This ideological separation has often positioned English as foreign or external to everyday Bangladeshi life. However, recent

sociolinguistic research suggests that younger generations are reshaping this relationship by integrating English into local communicative practices in ways that challenge traditional hierarchies. Banglish reflects this shift, functioning as a localized linguistic resource rather than a marker of exclusivity.

Urban youth contexts such as universities, peer-group interactions and digital platforms provide fertile ground for these translanguaging practices. In social media posts, memes, captions and online conversations, Banglish is frequently used for humor, creativity and informal expression. Similarly, in offline settings such as classrooms, group discussions and campus gatherings, Banglish often emerges as a shared communicative code among peers, signaling familiarity, solidarity and inclusion. These practices suggest that Banglish plays an important role not only in communication but also in shaping social relationships and a sense of belonging among young people.

Despite the growing visibility of Banglish, empirical research focusing specifically on youth perceptions, identity construction and social belonging in urban Bangladesh remains limited. While existing studies on translanguaging in Bangladesh (e.g., Sajib 2019; Rafi 2022; Ahmed 2023) have documented hybrid language practices in educational and digital contexts, fewer studies foreground the lived experiences and voices of urban youth across both online and offline spaces. There is therefore a need for empirically grounded research that captures how young people themselves understand and use Banglish in their everyday lives.

Responding to this gap, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore Banglish as a translanguaging practice among urban Bangladeshi youth. The study draws on survey responses from 26 urban participants to identify patterns of Banglish use, preferred contexts and general attitudes toward the language. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six university students and young professionals to gain deeper insight into how Banglish is experienced in relation to identity, peer interaction and social belonging. To support and contextualize these findings, ethnographic observations were carried out in informal settings, including university classrooms, peer-group discussions and everyday social interactions, focusing on the natural occurrence of Banglish in youth communication.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations to examine Banglish as a translanguaging practice among urban youth in Bangladesh.

Participants

- **Survey participants:** 26 urban youth aged 18–26, recruited through convenience sampling.
- **Interview participants:** 6 university students and young professionals selected for in-depth discussion of language practices.
- **Observational contexts:** University classrooms, peer-group interactions and digital platforms.

Data Collection Instruments

Survey: A 10-item questionnaire measuring frequency of use, attitudes and perceptions of Banglish.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews (20–30 minutes) focusing on identity, peer interaction and belonging.

Observations: Non-intrusive observations of naturalistic Banglish use in offline and online settings.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Data triangulation enhanced validity and analytical depth.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study in a format consistent with published empirical research articles. Results are organized thematically and supported by descriptive statistics, tables and qualitative evidence drawn from surveys, interviews and observations. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a comprehensive interpretation of Banglish as a translanguaging practice among urban youth in Bangladesh.

Participant Profile

A total of 26 respondents participated in the survey. The demographic distribution reflects a typical urban university-aged population, which is appropriate given the focus of the study on urban youth language practices.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Survey Participants (N = 26)

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE (%)
GENDER	Female	53.8
	Male	46.2
AGE	18–20	11.5
	21–23	80.8
	24–26	7.7
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	Bangla medium	50.0
	English medium	11.5
	Both Bangla & English	38.5

The demographic data indicate that most participants have been exposed to bilingual educational environments, which may contribute to their frequent use of Banglish in everyday communication.

Frequency and Contexts of Banglish Use

Survey results show that Banglish is widely used among participants, particularly in informal and peer-oriented contexts. As shown in Table 2, over 92% of respondents reported using Banglish either *often* or *always* in daily communication.

Table 2. Frequency of Banglish Use

FREQUENCY CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE (%)
ALWAYS	42.3
OFTEN	50.0
SOMETIMES	7.7
RARELY	0.0
NEVER	0.0

Participants were also asked to identify the primary contexts in which they use Banglish. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate that Banglish is predominantly used with friends and in online environments, while its use in formal classroom interaction remains limited.



Table 3. Contexts of Banglish Use

CONTEXT	PERCENTAGE (%)
WITH FRIENDS	69.2
SOCIAL MEDIA	23.1
CLASSROOM INTERACTION	3.8
ONLINE GAMING	3.8

These findings suggest that Banglish functions primarily as an informal communicative resource, closely tied to peer interaction and digital communication rather than institutional or formal settings.

Attitudes Toward Banglish

Participants' attitudes toward Banglish were measured using Likert-scale items focusing on comfort, identity and social belonging. Table 4 summarizes responses to selected attitudinal statements.

Table 4. Attitudes Toward Banglish (Selected Items)

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Banglish helps me express myself comfortably	30.8	42.3	26.9	0.0
Banglish gives me a sense of belonging	15.4	30.8	38.5	15.4
Banglish sounds modern/trendy	26.9	30.8	19.2	23.1

Overall, participants expressed largely positive attitudes toward Banglish, particularly in terms of expressive comfort. While perceptions of belonging were slightly more varied, a majority still associated Banglish with social connection and peer affiliation.

Perceived Social and Identity Functions of Banglish

In multiple-choice and open-ended responses, participants identified several key functions of Banglish. These are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Perceived Functions of Banglish

FUNCTION	PERCENTAGE (%)
COMFORTABLE SELF-EXPRESSION	80.8
CASUAL COMMUNICATION	46.2
PEER CONNECTION	42.3
PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH/ONLINE CULTURE	23.1
PROJECTION OF MODERN IDENTITY	23.1

Open-ended responses further illustrate these functions. Many participants noted that Banglish allows them to express humor and emotion more naturally, particularly in digital communication. Some respondents also reported feeling excluded when using Banglish with older adults or in highly formal contexts, highlighting the audience-sensitive nature of translanguaging practices.

Interview Findings: Thematic Analysis

Qualitative analysis of six semi-structured interviews produced three dominant themes, which provide deeper insight into the quantitative trends.

Theme 1: Expressive Flexibility and Ease

Participants consistently reported that Banglish enables them to articulate thoughts more precisely and creatively. Mixing languages allowed them to avoid lexical gaps and reduced anxiety about linguistic correctness.

Theme 2: Youth Culture and Trendiness

Interviewees emphasized that Banglish is strongly associated with urban youth culture, social media, and memes. It was described as “natural,” “modern,” and “relatable,” reinforcing its symbolic value among peers.

Theme 3: Social Belonging and Audience Awareness

While Banglish fostered inclusion among peers, participants were highly aware of audience expectations. Several noted that Banglish felt inappropriate or uncomfortable in interactions with older generations or authority figures.

Representative excerpts include:

- “Banglish makes conversations flow naturally in group discussions.”
- “It helps me feel included in online communities.”
- “With elders, I switch back to Bangla—it feels more respectful.”

Observational Findings

Ethnographic observations corroborated survey and interview data. In classroom settings, Banglish was observed mainly during informal peer discussions rather than teacher-led instruction. In peer groups, Banglish served social functions such as humor, teasing and bonding. Online observations revealed extensive use of Banglish in captions, comments and memes, often for comedic or expressive effect.

Linking Findings to Research Questions

The findings directly address the study’s research questions. **RQ1** (frequency and contexts of use) is answered by survey and observational data demonstrating that Banglish is used predominantly in peer-oriented and digital spaces, with limited presence in formal classroom discourse. **RQ2** (perceptions of Banglish) is addressed through attitudinal survey items and interview themes, which reveal that youth associate Banglish with expressive comfort, modernity and creativity. **RQ3** (social belonging) is supported by both qualitative and quantitative evidence showing that Banglish functions as a shared linguistic resource that fosters peer inclusion and in-group solidarity. Together, these findings confirm that Banglish operates as a structured translanguaging practice rather than random language mixing.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce the view that Banglish functions as a socially meaningful translanguaging practice among urban Bangladeshi youth. Consistent with translanguaging theory (García & Li, 2014), participants draw fluidly on Bangla and English to enhance communicative efficiency, emotional expression and interactional flow. Banglish thus operates as a pragmatic resource rather than a deviation from linguistic norms.

From an identity-theoretical perspective, these practices can be understood through Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic framework, which conceptualizes identity as emergent, relational and interactionally constructed. Banglish enables youth to index modernity and urban belonging while simultaneously maintaining cultural rootedness in Bangla. Through repeated use in peer and digital interactions, Banglish becomes an indexical marker of youth identity and in-group membership.

The study also highlights the audience-sensitive nature of translanguaging. Participants' selective use of Banglish, embracing it among peers while avoiding it with older interlocutors, demonstrates how identity positioning is negotiated across interactional contexts. This aligns with Bucholtz and Hall's emphasis on adequation and distinction, whereby speakers align with certain groups while differentiating themselves from others.

Digital spaces amplify these dynamics. The prevalence of Banglish in memes, captions and comments illustrates how translanguaging supports humor, creativity and community formation in online environments. These findings extend existing research on digital translanguaging by grounding it in both self-reported attitudes and observed interaction.

Overall, the study contributes to sociolinguistic scholarship by demonstrating how Banglish mediates the intersection of language, identity, and belonging in a rapidly globalizing urban context. Rather than signaling linguistic decline, Banglish reflects youth agency in reshaping linguistic norms to suit contemporary communicative realities.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Banglish functions as a strategic translanguaging practice through which urban Bangladeshi youth negotiate expression, identity, and social belonging. By integrating survey, interview, and observational data, the research underscores the sociolinguistic significance of Banglish in contemporary urban youth culture. The findings suggest that Banglish is not merely a form of code-mixing but a dynamic communicative resource that enables young people to express identity, creativity, and group affiliation in both physical and digital spaces.

The study is limited by its relatively small sample size and its exclusive focus on urban university communities, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand beyond urban university settings to include rural youth, individuals from different age groups, and participants representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Banglish usage across Bangladesh. Researchers should also examine how variables such as educational background, occupation, gender, and access to digital technologies shape patterns of translanguaging. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in tracing how Banglish evolves over time and whether frequently used expressions become established features of contemporary Bangla communication. In addition, future studies should explore the relationship between Banglish and broader issues such as social inclusion, educational practices, language policy, and professional communication to better understand its role in Bangladesh's multilingual society.

Participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and all observations and data were reported responsibly and ethically.

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