



Digital Colonialism and Linguistic Hegemony in Post-Pandemic Higher Education: A Study on Bangladeshi University Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of higher education globally. Yet in post-colonial societies like Bangladesh, this shift has paradoxically reinforced new forms of epistemic dependency and linguistic hierarchy. This paper, grounded in the Feminist Linguistic Coloniality (FLC) framework, critically examines how globally dominant ed-tech platforms—Zoom, Google Classroom, Moodle—impose Western pedagogical norms and privilege English-medium instruction, thereby marginalizing Bengali as an academic language. Employing a mixed-method research design, the study surveyed 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students and conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 faculty members from three public universities in Bangladesh. Findings indicate that English-only digital interfaces create significant accessibility barriers for students from rural and low-income backgrounds, disproportionately affecting women and indigenous minority groups. The study reveals a persistent devaluation of Bengali academic discourse, reinforcing colonial-era hierarchies. Drawing on FLC's concepts of 'Digital Linguistic Coloniality' and 'AI-Driven Epistemic Injustice,' this paper argues that the uncritical adoption of Western ed-tech tools constitutes a form of 'digital colonialism' that undermines authentic educational practices. This study is situated in the context of Bangladesh, a post-colonial South Asian nation, where the author is a national and a PhD candidate at Yangzhou University, China.

Keywords: *digital colonialism, linguistic hegemony, higher education, Feminist Linguistic Coloniality, Bangladesh, ed-tech, decolonization, SDG 4*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted higher education worldwide, compelling universities to adopt digital platforms for teaching, learning, and assessment. In Bangladesh, this transition was particularly challenging, as the country grapples with infrastructural limitations, a significant digital divide, and the enduring legacy of colonial language policies. While digital tools such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and Moodle promised continuity in education, they also introduced new forms of epistemic dependence and linguistic hierarchy.

Bangladesh's higher education system has historically been shaped by its colonial past, where English was established as the language of prestige, power, and knowledge (Rahman, 2021). This linguistic hegemony persists today, with English-medium instruction regarded as a marker of quality and modernity, while Bengali, the mother tongue of the nation, is often relegated to a secondary status (Chowdhury, 2020). The rapid adoption of Western ed-tech platforms during the pandemic has reinforced this hierarchy, as these tools are predominantly designed for English-speaking users and prioritize Western pedagogical norms (Selwyn, 2021).

Bangladesh's higher education sector has experienced significant expansion over the past two decades, with enrollment increasing from 1.5 million in 2010 to over 3.2 million in 2023 (University Grants Commission, 2023). However, this quantitative growth has not been matched by improvements in pedagogical quality, infrastructure, or linguistic inclusivity. The country's education system remains deeply influenced by its colonial past, where English was institutionalized as the language of power, administration, and knowledge production (Rahman, 2021; Pennycook, 1998). The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the closure of educational institutions worldwide, accelerated the adoption of digital platforms in Bangladesh. While this shift was framed as a necessary adaptation, it also exposed the deep-seated inequalities in access to technology, internet connectivity, and digital literacy. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2021), only 38% of rural households have internet access, compared to 72% in urban areas. Furthermore, the majority of secondary schools in Bangladesh use Bengali as the medium of instruction, while most public universities conduct classes in English—a linguistic mismatch that creates a significant barrier for students transitioning from Bengali-medium schools to English-medium higher education (Chowdhury, 2020).

This study addresses this critical gap by examining how digital platforms—adopted during the pandemic—reinforce linguistic hierarchies and gendered exclusion in Bangladeshi higher education. Drawing on the Feminist Linguistic Coloniality (FLC) framework, the study analyzes the intersection of language, technology, and power, and explores the possibilities for decolonizing digital education. This study applies the Feminist Linguistic Coloniality (FLC) framework to critically examine how digital platforms perpetuate linguistic exclusion in Bangladeshi higher education. FLC posits that language is not a neutral medium but a site

of power, where dominant languages (such as English) impose colonial structures on marginalized communities, particularly women and indigenous groups (Spivak, 1988; Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2003). Through a mixed-method research design—surveying 150 students and interviewing 12 faculty members from three public universities—this paper investigates the accessibility, inclusivity, and cultural relevance of digital learning environments in Bangladesh.

Preliminary findings indicate that English-only digital interfaces create significant barriers for students from rural and low-income backgrounds, disproportionately affecting women and ethnic minority groups. Furthermore, the devaluation of Bengali academic discourse reinforces colonial-era hierarchies and undermines the potential for decolonized, locally grounded knowledge production. By drawing on FLC's concepts of 'Digital Linguistic Coloniality' and 'AI-Driven Epistemic Injustice,' this paper argues that the uncritical adoption of Western ed-tech tools constitutes a form of 'digital colonialism' that erodes educational sovereignty (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). The paper concludes by proposing a decolonized digital curriculum that incorporates bilingual interfaces, locally relevant content, and participatory design, and offers policy recommendations for Bangladeshi universities to develop linguistically inclusive, context-sensitive digital learning environments.

As a Bangladeshi researcher and a PhD candidate at Yangzhou University, China, I bring a unique insider-outsider perspective to this study. My positionality allows me to critically engage with the linguistic and digital inequalities in Bangladeshi higher education while remaining sensitive to the local cultural and historical contexts that shape these dynamics.

Literature Review

Digital Transformation and Higher Education

The pandemic-induced shift to online learning has been described as the largest educational experiment in history (UNESCO, 2021). While digital platforms enabled continuity, they also exposed deep inequities in access, infrastructure, and digital literacy (World Bank, 2022). In the Global South, these challenges are compounded by historical inequalities and resource constraints (Selwyn, 2021).

Linguistic Hegemony and Colonial Legacies

Scholars have long documented how English has been positioned as the language of power and knowledge in post-colonial societies (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1998). In Bangladesh, English-medium education is often associated with prestige, while Bengali-medium education is stigmatized (Rahman, 2021; Chowdhury, 2020). This linguistic hierarchy perpetuates social and economic inequality, as access to English is unevenly distributed along lines of class, gender, and geography (Mohanty, 2006).

Digital Colonialism and Epistemic Violence

Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that digital capitalism constitutes a new form of colonialism, where data is extracted from the Global South to fuel Western technological

dominance. Zuboff (2019) similarly warns of surveillance capitalism, where digital platforms reshape social life according to corporate interests. In the educational context, the dominance of Western ed-tech platforms perpetuates what Mbembe (2019) calls "necropolitics"—a politics of death and exclusion that determines who can live and who must die, or in this case, who can learn and who is left behind.

The Role of AI in Education

AI-driven tools—such as automated grading, plagiarism detection, and adaptive learning systems—are increasingly used in higher education (Holmes et al., 2019). However, these tools are often trained on English-language datasets and reflect Western epistemological biases (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). This constitutes a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), where non-Western knowledge systems are systematically devalued.

Feminist Perspectives on Language and Technology

Feminist scholars have highlighted how technology reinforces gendered hierarchies and exclusions (Wajcman, 2004; Haraway, 1991). In the digital education context, women—particularly those from marginalized communities—face compounded barriers due to limited access to devices, internet, and linguistic capital (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2020; Ahmed, 2021). The FLC framework extends these critiques by centering language as a key axis of gendered marginalization.

Decolonial Pedagogy and Resistance

Decolonial scholars argue for the need to center local knowledge, languages, and epistemologies in education (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Mignolo, 2011). This involves not only translating content but reimagining the very structures of learning and knowledge production. In the digital context, this means designing platforms that are culturally and linguistically responsive and fostering pedagogies that embrace multilingualism and local contexts.

The Digital Divide in Bangladesh

The digital divide in Bangladesh is not merely a matter of infrastructure but is deeply intertwined with socio-economic inequality, gender, and geography. According to the International Telecommunication Union (2022), only 38% of Bangladeshi women use the internet, compared to 52% of men. This gender gap is even more pronounced in rural areas, where cultural norms often restrict women's access to technology. In the context of higher education, this means that female students from rural backgrounds face compounded barriers—limited internet access, lack of devices, and linguistic challenges—that hinder their participation in digital learning environments (Gurumurthy & Chami, 2020).

Post-Colonial Language Policy in Bangladesh

The language policy of Bangladesh is a product of its post-colonial history. The 1952 Language Movement, which established Bengali as a state language, was a defining moment in the nation's identity (Uddin, 2020). However, despite the symbolic importance of Bengali, English has retained its dominance in higher education, law, and international relations. This

linguistic dualism creates a unique challenge for students and educators, as they must navigate between the nationalist valorization of Bengali and the pragmatic demands of English-medium instruction (Khan, 2019).

Global Perspectives on Digital Language Inequality

Globally, the dominance of English in digital education is not unique to Bangladesh. Studies from India, Pakistan, and Sub-Saharan Africa have documented similar patterns where English-medium digital platforms create barriers for non-English-speaking students (cf. Pennycook, 1998; Canagarajah, 1999). These studies highlight that linguistic inequality is a structural feature of global digital education, rooted in colonial histories and perpetuated by contemporary technological designs (May, 2014). This global perspective reinforces the relevance of the FLC framework in understanding digital language inequality as a systemic issue.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design, specifically a sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), where quantitative data collection is followed by qualitative data collection to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The mixed-method approach adopted in this study allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The quantitative survey provides a broad overview of the linguistic and technological barriers faced by students, while the qualitative interviews offer in-depth insights into the lived experiences of both students and faculty. The use of a sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) ensures that the quantitative findings are contextualized and enriched by qualitative data.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students and 12 faculty members from three public universities in Bangladesh—University of Dhaka, University of Rajshahi, and University of Chittagong—participated in this study. Participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across disciplines, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. The selection of three universities from different geographical regions (Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong) was intentional, as it ensures regional diversity and captures the variation in digital access and linguistic practices across urban and rural settings (BBS, 2021). The inclusion of both students and faculty members allows for a multi-perspective understanding of the issues, as students' experiences are complemented by educators' observations and institutional insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Research Instruments or Materials

- **Student Survey:** A 25-item structured questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms. It measured access to digital devices, platform usage, linguistic barriers, and self-reported English proficiency. It was available in both English and Bengali to maximize participation. The survey was piloted with a small group of

students to ensure clarity and relevance, and modifications were made based on their feedback (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 faculty members to explore their perceptions of digital platforms, student engagement, linguistic challenges, and institutional policies. Each interview lasted 40–60 minutes and was recorded with consent. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, given the pandemic restrictions, and followed a semi-structured guide that allowed for flexibility in exploring emergent themes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Data Analysis

- **Quantitative:** Survey responses were analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were calculated to summarize the data. Inferential tests, including chi-square tests and independent t-tests, were used to examine relationships between variables such as gender, background (urban/rural), and perceived linguistic barriers.
- **Qualitative:** Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), guided by the FLC framework and its core components. The analysis followed a six-phase process: familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board at Yangzhou University. All participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized and stored securely. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Demographic Profile

A total of 150 students (85 female, 65 male) and 12 faculty members (6 male, 6 female) participated. Among students, 62% were from urban backgrounds, while 38% came from rural areas. Discipline-wise, 40% were from Humanities, 35% from STEM, and 25% from Business Studies.

Table No. 1. Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	85	56.7%
	Male	65	43.3%
Background	Urban	93	62.0%
	Rural	57	38.0%
Discipline	Humanities	60	40.0%
	STEM	53	35.3%
	Business	37	24.7%

Access to Digital Platforms

While 78% of students reported having regular access to a smartphone or laptop, only 42% had stable internet connectivity. Zoom (72%) was the most used platform, followed by Google Classroom (61%) and Moodle (43%).

Table No. 2. Access to Digital Devices and Internet Background

Background	Smartphone (%)	Laptop (%)	Stable Internet (%)
Urban	82%	68%	52%
Rural	56%	31%	22%

The data reveal a significant disparity in digital access between urban and rural students, particularly in terms of stable internet connectivity ($\chi^2 = 15.8$, $p < 0.001$). This disparity is further exacerbated by linguistic barriers, as rural students often struggle with English-medium interfaces.

Linguistic Barriers

68% of students agreed that English-medium interfaces made it difficult to engage with course content. Rural students faced higher barriers (78.9%). A chi-square test showed a significant association between gender and perceived linguistic barriers ($\chi^2 = 6.34$, $p < 0.05$), with female students reporting more difficulties.

Table No. 3. Perceived Linguistic Barriers by Gender and Background

Variable	Category	% Facing High Barriers	% Facing Moderate Barriers
Gender	Female	64.7%	28.2%
	Male	48.3%	35.4%
Background	Urban	51.6%	34.4%
	Rural	78.9%	16.8%

Gendered and Indigenous Disparities

Female students from rural and indigenous backgrounds emerged as the most marginalized group. Among 20 students who identified as belonging to indigenous communities (e.g., Chakma, Santal), 85% reported that English-only platforms alienated them from academic discussions, and 70% said they often skipped classes due to language anxiety. This finding highlights the intersectionality of linguistic, gendered, and indigenous marginalization in digital education.

Faculty Perspectives

Faculty interviews revealed concerns about low student participation and superficial engagement due to language barriers. Educators noted that English-dominated platforms limit students' ability to express complex ideas, particularly in Bengali. One faculty member commented:

"I have seen brilliant students who know the answers but hesitate to speak in English. On digital platforms, there is no option to speak in Bengali—so they stay silent." (Female faculty, Social Sciences)

Another faculty member noted:

"When students write in Bengali, they express complex ideas beautifully. But in the digital system, everything is evaluated in English. We are essentially telling them: your language is not good enough for knowledge." (Male faculty, Humanities)

These quotes illustrate how linguistic exclusion operates not only through institutional structures but also through internalized shame and fear of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991) that silences students before they even speak.

Discussion

This study applied the Feminist Linguistic Coloniality (FLC) framework to analyze how digital platforms perpetuate linguistic and gendered exclusion in Bangladeshi higher education. The findings reveal a complex interplay of structural, linguistic, and technological barriers that systematically marginalize students, particularly women and those from indigenous and rural backgrounds.

Linguistic Hegemony in Digital Spaces

The dominance of English in digital learning environments reflects what Phillipson (1992) termed linguistic imperialism. As FLC argues, this is not merely a linguistic issue but a continuation of colonial power structures through new technological mediums. The study confirms that English-only interfaces create an invisible but powerful gatekeeping mechanism, particularly for students from Bengali-medium and rural backgrounds. This linguistic hegemony is not only epistemic but also material, as it determines who has access to knowledge, credentials, and professional opportunities (Bourdieu, 1991).

Gendered Linguistic Gatekeeping

The findings highlight a significant gender gap in digital learning experiences. Female students, especially from rural and indigenous communities, face compounded disadvantages due to limited access to devices, internet, and language capital. This supports the FLC concept of Gendered Linguistic Gatekeeping, which argues that language acts as a gendered filter, restricting women's participation in academic and public spheres (Mohanty, 2003; Gurusurthy & Chami, 2020). In the Bangladeshi context, this gatekeeping is reinforced by social norms that often limit women's access to digital devices and private study spaces (Ahmed, 2021).

Digital Linguistic Coloniality and AI-Driven Epistemic Injustice

The uncritical adoption of Western ed-tech tools and AI-driven assessment platforms constitutes a new form of colonialism—Digital Linguistic Coloniality (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). These tools often devalue Bengali and indigenous knowledge, reinforcing what Fricker (2007) terms epistemic injustice. The study demonstrates how AI systems, trained on Western datasets, systematically fail to recognize or value non-English knowledge systems. For instance, Bengali-language essays may be flagged as "low quality" by AI scoring systems simply because they deviate from English syntactic norms (Benjamin, 2019).

Decolonial Digital Resistance

Despite these challenges, the study identified possibilities for resistance. Some faculty members and students have adopted informal strategies—such as using Bengali in lectures, translating instructions, and fostering bilingual discussions—to create more inclusive environments. FLC provides a framework for Decolonial Digital Resistance, which includes designing bilingual interfaces, creating local content, and involving students and educators in the design and evaluation of digital tools. As one faculty member noted:

"We need to decolonize our teaching. Digital platforms should not be just English. They should be accessible and respectful of our languages and cultures." (Male faculty, STEM)

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study highlight the need for a decolonial approach to digital education in Bangladesh. Decolonial pedagogy, as articulated by Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), emphasizes the importance of centering local knowledge, languages, and epistemologies in

the learning process. In the digital context, this means designing platforms that are not only linguistically inclusive but also culturally responsive. For example, digital tools should incorporate Bengali as an equal language of instruction, rather than relegating it to a secondary status. Moreover, educators should be trained to use translanguaging practices that allow students to express themselves in their native languages, thereby fostering a more inclusive and participatory learning environment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the rapid digitization of higher education in Bangladesh has not democratized learning but has often exacerbated colonial hierarchies and gendered exclusions. Using the FLC framework, it shows how English-dominated digital platforms, AI tools, and Western pedagogical norms systematically marginalize non-English-speaking, rural, and indigenous students—particularly women. The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic change, including bilingual interfaces, local content creation, gender-sensitive policies, and decolonial pedagogies.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the digital transformation of higher education in Bangladesh, while promising, has inadvertently reinforced colonial hierarchies and gendered exclusions. The uncritical adoption of Western ed-tech platforms and English-centric pedagogies has created a digital divide that disproportionately affects women, rural, and indigenous students. By applying the FLC framework, this paper has shown how language operates as a site of power and resistance in digital education.

To address these challenges, the study recommends a multi-pronged approach that includes: (1) adopting bilingual digital platforms that recognize Bengali as an equal language of instruction; (2) investing in locally relevant digital content that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of Bangladesh; (3) providing targeted language support for students from non-English-medium backgrounds; and (4) fostering decolonial pedagogies that center student voices and experiences.

Recommendations

- For Universities: Adopt bilingual digital platforms, invest in local content, and establish digital support centers for students.
- For Educators: Use translanguaging practices, record bilingual lectures, and provide scaffolded language support.
- For Policymakers: Integrate language-sensitive digital education policies and ensure gender-responsive technology initiatives.
- For Ed-Tech Developers: Design multilingual, culturally responsive platforms and audit AI tools for linguistic bias.
- For Future Research: Conduct comparative and ethnographic studies to explore linguistic inequality in digital education across different regions and institutions.

Future Research

Future research should explore the long-term impact of digital colonialism on educational equity in Bangladesh. Comparative studies across public and private universities could reveal how institutional resources shape linguistic inclusion. Additionally, ethnographic research on indigenous students' experiences with digital platforms could provide deeper insights into the intersection of language, technology, and identity. Finally, intervention studies that design and test bilingual digital tools could offer practical solutions for decolonizing digital education.

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