

AI-Mediated Linguistic Capital in Bangladesh: Rethinking the Value of English in the Age of Generative AI

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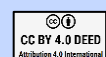
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ABSTRACT

The rapid diffusion of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming how English is learned, used, and valued, raising questions about the future of linguistic capital in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. While previous studies have primarily examined AI as a pedagogical tool, limited attention has been paid to how it transforms the social and economic value of English proficiency. Addressing this gap, this study investigates how Bangladeshi tertiary EFL students perceive the changing value of English in the era of generative AI through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve English-major students at a private university in Bangladesh and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. The findings indicate that generative AI has not reduced the importance of English but has shifted its value from linguistic accuracy toward higher-order communicative competencies, including critical thinking, contextual judgment, strategic communication, and ethical AI use. Building on these findings, the study proposes AI-mediated linguistic capital, a conceptual extension of Bourdieu's framework, to explain how educational and professional advantage increasingly depends on the strategic integration of English proficiency and AI literacy. Rather than democratizing opportunity, AI appears to reconfigure existing inequalities by privileging learners with stronger linguistic, digital, and critical competencies. The study contributes a novel theoretical perspective on linguistic capital in the AI era while offering implications for English language education, AI literacy, and graduate employability.

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1. Introduction

English has long occupied a privileged position in the global knowledge economy, functioning not merely as a means of communication but as a form of linguistic capital that structures access to education, employment, social mobility, and transnational opportunities (Bourdieu, 1991; Block et al., 2012). Because proficiency in English has historically been unevenly distributed, it has acquired substantial exchange value in both national and global markets. Consequently, governments have expanded English language education (Rahman & Pandian, 2018), universities have institutionalized English-medium instruction (Hopkyns et al., 2025; Liao et al., 2025), and individuals have

invested considerable resources in acquiring English as an economic asset (Grin, 2001). In Bangladesh, this “English premium” has become particularly salient, where proficiency often functions as a gateway to higher education, multinational employment (Ali & Hamid, 2024; Roshid & Chowdhury, 2023), international migration, and the country’s rapidly growing digital economy.

The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), however, calls this long-standing assumption into question. Unlike earlier language technologies that merely supported grammar correction or machine translation, contemporary large language models can generate, revise, summarize, translate, and adapt sophisticated texts across languages with minimal user input (Kasneci et al., 2023). These developments do not necessarily diminish the importance of English, but they invite a more fundamental question about the political economy of language: What happens to the exchange value of English when high-quality English communication is no longer dependent solely on individual linguistic competence? While employers, universities, and global markets continue to reward English proficiency, AI increasingly enables individuals with limited language skills to participate in English-mediated communication. The resulting tension suggests that the source of competitive advantage may be shifting from language proficiency alone towards the capacity to strategically mobilize algorithmic language systems.

This emerging transformation remains insufficiently theorized within applied linguistics. Existing scholarship has extensively examined English as a commodified resource under globalization, demonstrating how language operates as a form of symbolic and economic capital within neoliberal economies (Kubota, 2011; Park, 2011; Khan & Haidar, 2026). Meanwhile, a rapidly expanding body of research on GenAI has focused on writing assistance, language learning, assessment, and learner perceptions (Kohnke et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2026). Although both literatures offer valuable insights, they rarely intersect. Consequently, little attention has been paid to how generative AI may transform the political economy of English itself by altering the scarcity, exchange value, and convertibility of linguistic capital. Rather than assuming that English will either lose or retain its value, there is a need to examine how AI may be redefining what constitutes valuable linguistic competence in contemporary societies.

Bangladesh provides a particularly instructive context for exploring this transformation. English remains a critical resource for accessing prestigious education, competitive employment, international development organizations, and global freelancing platforms. At the same time, AI-powered writing and translation tools have become increasingly accessible through smartphones and cloud-based applications, allowing wider participation in English-mediated communication. This convergence suggests that competitive advantage may be shifting from English proficiency alone towards the ability to effectively mobilize AI for communication, problem-solving, and knowledge production. In other words, while English may remain important, the mechanisms through which linguistic capital is accumulated and converted into economic value may be undergoing significant change.

Building on Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of linguistic capital and scholarship on the political economy of language (Block et al., 2012; Duchêne & Heller, 2012), this paper argues that generative AI requires a reconceptualization of linguistic capital rather than simply a reassessment of English proficiency. It introduces the notion of AI-mediated linguistic capital to explain how the value of English increasingly depends not only on linguistic competence but also on the capacity to strategically deploy algorithmic

systems for communication and knowledge work. This perspective positions AI not merely as an educational tool but as an actor that reshapes the production, circulation, and valuation of linguistic resources.

By revisiting linguistic capital through the lens of generative AI, this study makes three contributions. First, it extends theories of linguistic capital to account for algorithmic mediation in the digital economy. Second, it bridges two largely separate fields of inquiry, the political economy of English and AI-assisted language practices, into a unified theoretical framework. Finally, using Bangladesh as a theoretically significant context rather than simply a national case, it offers new insights into how language policy, English language education, and labour-market expectations may need to adapt as the relationship between English proficiency and socioeconomic mobility is increasingly reconfigured in the age of generative AI.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Beyond Classical Linguistic Capital

This study builds on Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital while arguing that the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) necessitates its theoretical extension. Bourdieu conceptualizes language as symbolic capital whose value is determined by its recognition within particular linguistic markets rather than by its intrinsic communicative properties. Linguistic competence therefore acquires exchange value because institutions, including schools, employers, and the state, legitimate certain linguistic practices and convert them into educational, economic, and social advantage (Peltokorpi & Xie, 2025; Tripp & Munson, 2023). This perspective has profoundly shaped scholarship on English by demonstrating that its value is socially produced and unequally distributed rather than linguistically inherent (Gapur & Taulia, 2023; Yoon, 2025).

The Bangladeshi context illustrates this dynamic particularly well. English proficiency functions simultaneously as a ladder for socioeconomic mobility and a gatekeeper that reproduces social inequality. Recent evidence indicates that 86.25% of respondents perceive English as providing access to elite social and professional networks, while 68.75% acknowledge its role in maintaining class hierarchies (Shaikh & Munmun, 2026). Similar inequalities are evident in higher education, where 74.8% of university students believe English-medium graduates receive greater academic opportunities, and 27% report experiencing academic exclusion because of limited English proficiency (Jamil, 2026). Beyond educational access, the strategic deployment of English alongside standard forms of Bangla continues to signal social status and legitimate existing class distinctions, reflecting Bourdieu's (1991) argument that linguistic capital contributes to the reproduction of social inequality (Hossain & Fatema, 2022). For graduates, English proficiency remains convertible into economic capital through enhanced employability, international business, and higher earnings, although these benefits are disproportionately available to individuals from privileged educational backgrounds who have accumulated greater linguistic capital (Islam & Ramalingam, 2024).

Critical political economy approaches have further shown that the global dominance of English is inseparable from neoliberal globalization (Gray, 2012), which commodifies language as a resource for employability, international mobility, and economic competitiveness (Amin et al., 2025; Heller, 2010). Together, these perspectives explain why English functions as convertible capital across educational and

labour markets. However, they largely assume that valuable linguistic performance originates from individual linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965). Consequently, they provide limited analytical leverage for understanding communicative environments in which algorithmic systems increasingly participate in producing legitimate linguistic outputs.

Moreover, the emergence of large language models fundamentally alters the conditions under which linguistic value is produced. Unlike earlier language technologies that primarily supported writing or translation (Kasneci et al., 2023), generative AI can generate, revise, summarize, and adapt sophisticated multilingual texts with minimal human input (Zhang et al., 2026; Joo & Belcher, 2025). Rather than reducing the value of English, these technologies reconfigure the linguistic market by separating high-quality language production from individual language proficiency alone.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, this development shifts the locus of scarcity within linguistic markets. If AI enables individuals with varying levels of English proficiency to produce institutionally acceptable English, competitive advantage increasingly depends not only on linguistic competence but also on the ability to direct, evaluate, and strategically integrate AI-generated language into academic and professional practice. The object of exchange therefore expands from language proficiency itself to the capacity to mediate linguistic production through algorithmic systems. This transformation calls for a reconceptualization of linguistic capital rather than a simple reassessment of English proficiency.

2.2 AI-Mediated Linguistic Capital

To account for this transformation, this study introduces the concept of AI-mediated linguistic capital. The concept refers to the capacity to strategically mobilize generative AI to produce, evaluate, refine, and adapt language in ways that are recognized as valuable within institutional and economic contexts. It extends Bourdieu's framework by locating linguistic value not solely in individual competence but in the interaction between human expertise and algorithmic language production.

AI-mediated linguistic capital refers to the capacity to strategically employ generative AI to produce, evaluate, refine, and adapt language in ways recognized as valuable within institutional and economic contexts. It therefore encompasses considerably more than technical familiarity with AI tools. It includes prompt design, critical evaluation of AI outputs, contextual adaptation, ethical judgment, domain knowledge, and the ability to integrate algorithmic production into professional communication and knowledge work.

Conceptually, AI-mediated linguistic capital differs from traditional linguistic capital in three important respects. First, linguistic competence becomes increasingly distributed between human and technological actors rather than remaining solely an individual attribute. Second, the scarcity underlying linguistic markets shifts from fluent language production alone toward strategic algorithmic mediation. Third, the convertibility of linguistic capital increasingly depends upon access to digital infrastructure, AI literacy, and institutional acceptance of AI-assisted communication.

Importantly, this framework does not suggest that English proficiency becomes irrelevant. Rather, English and AI become mutually constitutive resources. Strong English competence enhances individuals' ability to critically evaluate and refine AI-generated texts, while AI simultaneously enables less proficient users to participate more effectively in English-mediated communication. Consequently, linguistic

advantage increasingly derives from the interaction between English proficiency and algorithmic competence instead of either resource independently.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how tertiary students perceive the changing value of English in the age of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Given that the study seeks to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations rather than to measure predefined variables, semi-structured interviews were considered the most appropriate method of data generation. This approach provided sufficient flexibility to probe participants' views while maintaining consistency across interviews.

The participants comprised twelve undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of English at a private university in Khulna, Bangladesh. Participants were chosen through convenience sampling based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. Of the twelve participants, four were female and eight were male. Three had completed their pre-university education in English-medium institutions, while the remaining nine came from traditional Bangla-medium backgrounds. To capture perspectives across different stages of academic development, five participants were first-year students and seven were final-year students. Although convenience sampling limits statistical generalizability, it is widely accepted in exploratory qualitative research where the objective is to obtain rich, context-specific insights rather than representative estimates. English-major students constitute a theoretically relevant participant group because they are intensive users of English and are among the earliest adopters of AI-assisted writing technologies in higher education. Positioned at the intersection of English language learning, academic writing, and imminent labour-market entry, they provide a valuable perspective for examining how linguistic capital may be reconfigured through AI-mediated communication.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol consisted of twelve open-ended questions addressing four broad themes: (a) perceptions of the value of English for education and employment, (b) experiences of using generative AI for academic and communicative purposes, (c) perceptions of whether AI is transforming the value of English proficiency, and (d) expectations regarding future language and employment skills. The entire interview protocol was conducted in English, and each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure analytical accuracy.

The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis followed six iterative phases: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing. NVivo was employed as a qualitative data management tool to facilitate data organization, coding, retrieval, and comparison across participants. However, theme development remained an interpretive and reflexive process guided by the researcher rather than being generated by the software.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, coding was conducted iteratively through repeated engagement with the transcripts to ensure that themes remained grounded in participants' accounts while being interpreted through the study's theoretical framework of linguistic capital and AI-mediated linguistic capital. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. To protect participants'

anonymity, pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting of findings, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 English as Institutionalized Gatekeeping Capital

Participants consistently constructed English as an institutionalized form of linguistic capital that regulates access to higher education, prestigious employment, and global knowledge networks in Bangladesh. Rather than describing English merely as a communicative resource, they portrayed it as a gatekeeping mechanism through which educational institutions and employers recognize, evaluate, and reward competence. This finding reinforces Bourdieu's (1991) proposition that linguistic capital derives its value not from language itself but from its institutional recognition within particular linguistic markets. However, participants' accounts also suggest an important refinement: in contemporary Bangladesh, English functions less as evidence of communicative ability than as a performative signal of professional competence and employability.

Most participants emphasized that English remains indispensable for accessing higher education and international knowledge. They repeatedly referred to English-language textbooks, research publications, scholarships, and global academic collaboration as resources that remain inaccessible without English proficiency. As Participant 1 explained,

The vast majority of advanced textbooks, research papers, and global online courses are in English. If you can't access that primary material, you're always working with a filtered or second-hand understanding.

Equally, Participant 11 described English as "non-negotiable" for postgraduate study abroad because admission, research publication, and scholarly collaboration continue to operate predominantly through English. These accounts indicate that English continues to function as educational capital, enabling access to globally valued knowledge while simultaneously excluding those unable to participate in English-mediated academic practices.

Participants extended this logic to employment. English was consistently described as a prerequisite for careers in multinational corporations, NGOs, information technology, banking, and international development. Yet significantly, participants rarely framed English as valuable because of communication alone. Instead, they portrayed it as the language through which competence itself becomes institutionally visible. Participant 9 argued that English is "the medium through which you demonstrate your intelligence, competence, and professionalism", while Participant 7 emphasized that professional success increasingly depends upon the ability to write reports, negotiate with international clients, and communicate confidently in professional settings. These accounts suggest that English functions not merely as linguistic competence but as a symbolic performance through which employability is judged.

This distinction represents an important theoretical extension of Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital. The present findings suggest that contemporary employers increasingly evaluate not simply what applicants know but how convincingly they perform competence through English. Linguistic capital therefore operates as a performative resource that renders technical expertise institutionally recognizable. As Participant 1 reflected, a technically skilled friend failed to secure employment because he could not communicate confidently during an English interview despite excelling in

technical assessments. Similarly, Participant 2 observed that her internship supervisor attributed her selection primarily to her English communication skills rather than academic achievement. In these accounts, English functions less as a measure of knowledge than as the medium through which knowledge becomes economically convertible.

At the same time, participants demonstrated a critical awareness that this linguistic hierarchy is socially constructed rather than inherently justified. Several explicitly challenged the disproportionate value attached to English. Participant 6 described English as “the gatekeeper to success” questioning why “your ability to speak a foreign language” should determine future opportunities. Likewise, Participant 10 argued that English has become “the primary measure of intelligence and capability”, characterizing this logic as “elitist”, while Participant 12 advocated a multilingual perspective in which “English is one tool among many”. These accounts reveal an important paradox. Participants simultaneously criticized the dominance of English while continuing to invest heavily in acquiring it because educational and labour-market institutions continue to reward English proficiency. This illustrates Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of symbolic power: the legitimacy of linguistic hierarchies persists not because individuals necessarily believe they are fair, but because institutional structures continue to convert English proficiency into educational and economic advantage.

Personal experiences further illustrated how linguistic capital produces unequal trajectories of participation. Participants educated in English-medium environments described English as facilitating conference presentations, international internships, academic networking, and classroom participation. In contrast, those from Bengali-medium backgrounds frequently described anxiety, self-censorship, and diminished confidence despite possessing strong academic ability. Participant 5 reflected,

It’s not that I don’t know English, I can read and write pretty well, but speaking is terrifying.

Besides, Participant 8 recalled avoiding classroom participation after an unsuccessful English presentation, while Participant 3 described remaining silent during early university discussions because of fear of making linguistic mistakes. These narratives demonstrate that linguistic capital influences not only employment outcomes but also everyday opportunities to accumulate additional academic, social, and professional capital throughout higher education.

Perhaps the strongest consensus emerged around the unequal distribution of English itself. Every participant rejected the notion that opportunities to acquire English proficiency are equally available across Bangladesh. Instead, they consistently identified socioeconomic status, educational background, urban-rural disparities, family environment, and institutional quality as determining access to valuable linguistic resources. Participant 5 summarized this inequality succinctly:

It’s not about intelligence, it’s about opportunity.

Additionally, Participant 1 described English learning as structured by “the urban-rural and rich-poor divide”, while Participant 10 argued that English operates as “a tool of social reproduction”. These findings strongly support Bourdieu’s argument that linguistic capital is accumulated through unequal access to educational resources rather than individual merit alone. However, the findings also point toward an important limitation of classical linguistic capital theory. Participants repeatedly described English as valuable because it provides access to institutional opportunities rather than because

of the language itself. In other words, the scarcity being rewarded is not English but the ability to produce institutionally legitimate communication.

This distinction becomes theoretically significant in light of generative AI. Although participants in this theme largely continued to perceive English as indispensable, several had already begun questioning whether AI-assisted communication may reduce the exclusive value traditionally attached to English proficiency. Participant 4, for example, argued that advances in AI translation mean “the barrier is lowering”, suggesting that “the need for perfect spoken English is decreasing” provided individuals can communicate their ideas effectively. Such observations indicate that participants themselves increasingly distinguish between possessing English proficiency and accessing English-mediated opportunities through technological assistance.

4.2 AI as an Infrastructure for Producing Linguistic Capital

Findings, in this section, suggest that contemporary linguistic capital is no longer constituted solely through embodied English proficiency but is increasingly enacted through interaction with algorithmic language systems. This marks an important shift in the political economy of English: competitive advantage increasingly depends not only on possessing English but also on strategically mobilizing AI to produce institutionally valued communication.

Across the interviews, ChatGPT emerged as the dominant platform, although students also reported using Gemini, Claude, Grammarly, DeepL, Copilot, Perplexity, and AI-enabled reference managers for different communicative purposes. AI was employed throughout the academic communication process, including brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, summarizing, translating, preparing presentations, coding assistance, and literature review. Participant 4, who described himself as “basically a power user”, explained:

ChatGPT is my daily driver... Claude is fantastic for long-form content... Copilot is integrated into my searching information environment... Perplexity for research because it cites sources.

The significance of this finding lies less in the diversity of tools than in their integration into routine academic practice. AI has become part of the communicative infrastructure through which students access, organize, and produce knowledge. Academic writing consequently appears less as an individual cognitive activity than as a distributed process involving continuous interaction between human judgement and algorithmic assistance.

Importantly, participants overwhelmingly rejected the idea that AI simply produces academic work on their behalf. Instead, they described iterative workflows in which AI generated preliminary linguistic resources that were subsequently evaluated, revised, and personalized. Participant 1 explained:

I never use it to just write the whole thing for me... I use it to get over writer's block... Then I take that draft and heavily edit it, adding my own voice.

Likewise, Participant 4 outlined a multi-stage writing process:

I start by generating an outline with ChatGPT. Then I write a rough draft myself. Then I ask ChatGPT to improve the flow... Finally, I do a manual edit to make sure it sounds like me.

These accounts challenge the common binary that positions AI either as replacing human writing or merely assisting it. Instead, participants conceptualized writing as a collaborative process in which linguistic production emerges through iterative

negotiation between human expertise and algorithmic suggestions. What distinguished successful AI users was therefore not simply access to the technology but the capacity to regulate, critique, and reshape its outputs.

A second pattern concerns the changing relationship between English proficiency and access to academic knowledge. Participants repeatedly described AI as reducing immediate linguistic barriers by explaining difficult concepts, simplifying complex texts, improving grammar, and translating between Bengali and English. Participant 5 noted:

Sometimes I read an article and I don't understand what it means, so I ask ChatGPT to explain it in simpler English.

Correspondingly, Participant 8 admitted:

I'm not very confident in my English, so I rely on these tools a lot.

From a Bourdieu perspective, these accounts suggest an important transformation in the accumulation of linguistic capital. Traditionally, access to valuable English required prolonged investment through schooling, sustained exposure, and embodied linguistic socialization (Bourdieu, 1991). Participants' experiences indicate that generative AI increasingly compresses this accumulation process by enabling users to generate, translate, and refine sophisticated English on demand. Consequently, the scarcity upon which the exchange value of English has historically depended is no longer located exclusively in individual linguistic competence. Instead, it is increasingly mediated through access to and effective use of algorithmic language systems.

Crucially, however, the findings do not indicate that English itself is becoming obsolete. Rather, participants consistently treated AI as expanding participation within English-mediated communication rather than replacing English altogether. English remains the dominant institutional currency for higher education, research, and professional communication. What appears to be changing is the mechanism through which individuals gain access to that currency. The findings therefore support a refinement of Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital: under conditions of generative AI, institutional advantage depends increasingly on the capacity to mediate English through algorithmic technologies rather than solely on the embodied possession of English proficiency.

Participants also demonstrated considerable awareness that AI-generated language requires critical evaluation. Rather than accepting outputs uncritically, many emphasized verification, editing, and contextual adaptation. Participant 2 remarked:

I always double-check because AI makes mistakes.

Similarly, Participant 11 explained:

I don't use it to write for me, I use it as a second pair of eyes.

These responses indicate that effective AI use demands competencies extending beyond language proficiency itself. The data suggest that AI-mediated linguistic capital comprises at least three interrelated capacities. The first is algorithmic orchestration, the ability to select appropriate AI systems for different communicative purposes. The second is critical evaluation, the capacity to identify hallucinations, factual inaccuracies, and stylistic weaknesses in AI-generated outputs. The third is rhetorical adaptation, the ability to reshape AI-generated language according to audience, disciplinary conventions, and institutional expectations. Participants who described sophisticated AI workflows consistently demonstrated all three capacities, whereas less experienced users relied primarily on basic translation or grammar correction.

At the same time, participants recognized important risks accompanying these emerging practices. Across interviews, three concerns recurred consistently:

dependency, factual unreliability, and academic integrity. Participant 1 warned that over-reliance could gradually diminish independent thinking:

You start to lose your own critical thinking and writing skills.

Participant 2 described discovering that an AI-generated citation “didn’t even exist”, while Participant 3 questioned whether extensive AI assistance blurred the boundary between learning and plagiarism:

Even if you’re not copying directly, if the ideas aren’t yours, is it really your work?

These concerns are theoretically significant because they reveal that the institutional legitimacy of AI-assisted communication remains contested. In Bourdieu’s terms, linguistic capital acquires value only when recognized as legitimate within a particular linguistic market. Participants’ uncertainty regarding plagiarism, authenticity, and acceptable AI use suggests that the rules governing legitimate communication are currently undergoing renegotiation. Consequently, AI-mediated linguistic capital is not merely a technical competence but a socially recognized form of practice whose value depends upon evolving institutional norms within universities and workplaces.

Accordingly, the findings provide strong empirical support for the concept of AI-mediated linguistic capital advanced in this study. The present data do not suggest that English is losing its institutional value; instead, they demonstrate that the processes through which linguistic capital is accumulated, enacted, and converted into academic advantage are being fundamentally reorganized. Bourdieu conceptualized linguistic capital as deriving primarily from mastery of legitimate linguistic forms. Under conditions of generative AI, however, mastery increasingly includes the ability to orchestrate algorithmic systems while retaining critical authority over their outputs. Generative AI therefore does not replace linguistic capital; it transforms its mode of reproduction. Competitive advantage now lies less in possessing English alone than in strategically mobilizing AI to produce institutionally legitimate English, thereby reconfiguring, but not eliminating, the political economy of language in the age of generative AI.

4.3 AI and the Changing Value of the English

Their accounts suggest that AI is shifting the exchange value of linguistic capital from linguistic accuracy toward strategic communicative judgment. For instance, Participant 1 explained that AI has not made English less important but has changed “what’s important”, arguing that users now need “to be a strategic user of English and AI, not just a user of English”. Similarly, Participant 2 observed that while AI reduces the need to memorize grammar rules, users must still understand “context, nuance, and culture” to judge whether AI-generated texts are appropriate. Echoing this position, Participant 4 described AI as automating routine linguistic tasks while increasing the importance of persuasion, tone, and strategic communication, concluding that “the importance of English hasn’t decreased, but the way we learn it and what we learn has shifted”.

Even participants who initially believed AI made English easier repeatedly emphasized that AI could not substitute for deeper linguistic competence. Participant 5 remarked that although AI makes English “more accessible”, users still need English for professional interaction. Besides, Participant 8 described AI as making communication simultaneously “easier and harder” because users must still determine whether AI-generated outputs are accurate.

Rather than signalling the decline of English, these accounts indicate a qualitative transformation in what constitutes valuable linguistic competence. Within Bourdieu's (1991) framework, linguistic capital derives its value from the recognition granted by linguistic markets. Participants suggest that AI is restructuring these markets by reducing the scarcity value of routine linguistic production while increasing the premium placed on evaluative and strategic communicative abilities. Consequently, the symbolic value of English is no longer located primarily in grammatical mastery but increasingly in the capacity to supervise, refine, and strategically deploy AI-generated language.

This finding extends Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital by demonstrating that generative AI has altered not merely the means through which linguistic resources are produced but also the criteria through which they acquire exchange value. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes AI-mediated linguistic capital as a hybrid communicative resource in which linguistic competence remains indispensable but derives its value through users' capacity to integrate AI strategically rather than independently producing every linguistic output. English therefore remains valuable, yet its market value increasingly depends on human-AI interaction rather than human linguistic ability alone.

Correspondingly, participants consistently rejected the proposition that generative AI enables less proficient English users to perform on an equal footing with fluent speakers. Instead, they portrayed AI as reducing observable differences in written communication while leaving underlying communicative competence largely unchanged. Their experiences suggest that AI compensates for certain deficiencies but cannot substitute for the embodied dimensions of linguistic capital that emerge during spontaneous interaction.

Several participants differentiated between producing polished written texts and demonstrating genuine communicative competence. Participant 1 argued that AI may generate "a perfect essay", but students with limited English still struggle to understand complex instructions, engage in seminars, or interpret nuanced feedback. Using a vivid analogy, the participant compared AI-assisted writing to "a passenger sitting in a self-driving car", emphasizing that producing acceptable outputs does not necessarily develop underlying linguistic ability.

Besides, Participant 2 described a classmate who consistently obtained strong grades on AI-assisted assignments but struggled during classroom discussions and presentations because "AI can write for you, but it can't think for you or speak for you". Similar distinctions were echoed across the interviews. Participants repeatedly argued that interviews, negotiations, presentations, networking, and collaborative discussions continue to reward spontaneous communication, interactional competence, and contextual responsiveness that AI cannot fully perform on behalf of users.

These findings suggest that generative AI primarily compensates for the production of linguistic forms rather than the embodied competencies accumulated through prolonged socialization. Bourdieu conceptualized linguistic capital as embodied habitus developed through continuous participation within linguistic fields. Participants' experiences indicate that although AI facilitates access to linguistically polished outputs, it does not reproduce the embodied dispositions required for effective real-time communication. Consequently, AI appears to reduce visible manifestations of linguistic inequality without fully transforming the underlying distribution of linguistic capital.

This distinction further operationalizes the concept of AI-mediated linguistic capital. Rather than replacing embodied linguistic competence, AI functions as a mediating resource that temporarily enhances communicative performance in specific

contexts, particularly written academic tasks. However, its effectiveness remains contingent upon users' existing linguistic knowledge and communicative judgment. AI therefore compresses performance gaps without eliminating the structural advantages associated with accumulated linguistic capital.

Finally, participants anticipated that institutions would increasingly value the ability to combine English proficiency with effective AI use, suggesting the emergence of a transformed linguistic market in which AI literacy becomes an additional source of symbolic advantage.

Participant 1 predicted that employers would increasingly ask whether candidates could "use AI tools like ChatGPT to accelerate your workflow" while simultaneously evaluating their capacity to think critically about AI-generated outputs. Likewise, Participant 2 argued that organizations would seek individuals capable of using English "to think critically, solve problems, and collaborate", emphasizing that "you need to be bilingual in both English and AI". Participant 4 equally anticipated that employers would prioritize individuals who can "use AI to produce high-quality work efficiently" while demonstrating persuasion, storytelling, and emotional intelligence, abilities unlikely to be fully automated.

Interestingly, several participants questioned whether these developments would democratize opportunity. Participant 6 cautioned that institutions might simply add AI literacy to existing expectations rather than fundamentally reconsidering recruitment criteria. Participant 10 correspondingly worried that AI would "just add another requirement", allowing already privileged individuals to accumulate further advantages. These concerns indicate that participants perceive AI not only as a technological innovation but also as a potential mechanism through which new forms of educational and professional inequality may emerge.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, linguistic markets continually redefine which forms of capital are considered legitimate and valuable. Participants' expectations suggest that institutional recognition is gradually shifting toward hybrid communicative competencies that integrate English proficiency, AI literacy, critical judgment, and strategic communication. Accordingly, AI literacy itself appears to be acquiring symbolic value because institutions increasingly recognize it as evidence of productivity, adaptability, and professional competence.

This empirical pattern constitutes the central theoretical contribution of the study. Rather than replacing linguistic capital, generative AI appears to be producing a new configuration in which linguistic capital is increasingly realized through effective human-AI collaboration. The concept of AI-mediated linguistic capital therefore captures this emerging hybrid form of capital, where competitive advantage depends not solely on possessing English proficiency but on strategically mobilizing English together with AI systems to generate credible, contextually appropriate, and institutionally valued communication. Consequently, generative AI does not democratize linguistic markets; instead, it restructures the mechanisms through which linguistic advantage is accumulated, recognized, and converted into educational and occupational opportunities.

4.4 Future Language Skills and Employability

Building upon participants' experiences with generative AI, the interviews consistently suggested that English proficiency alone is insufficient for future academic and professional success. Rather than replacing human expertise, AI increases the

importance of complementary competencies that enable users to evaluate, direct, and refine machine-generated communication. Participants therefore conceptualized effective AI use as a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and digital capabilities.

Across the interviews, critical thinking emerged as the most frequently identified competence. Participants repeatedly argued that AI outputs require continuous evaluation for accuracy, bias, relevance, and credibility. As Participant 2 explained, users cannot simply accept AI responses but must ask whether they are “logical”, “accurate”, and “biased”. Correspondingly, Participant 1 emphasized that without critical evaluation, users become “just a parrot repeating what the machine tells you”. Beyond evaluation, many participants highlighted prompt engineering as an emerging communication skill. Rather than viewing prompting as merely technical, they described it as the ability to articulate communicative intentions clearly and strategically. Participant 4 noted that effective prompting requires users to “provide context and iterate”, while others emphasized research literacy, digital literacy, ethical awareness, creativity, and subject-specific knowledge as equally important for supervising AI outputs.

These findings suggest that AI shifts communicative competence beyond traditional language proficiency toward a broader constellation of cognitive and digital resources. Within the proposed framework, AI-mediated linguistic capital therefore depends not only on English proficiency but also on complementary capitals, particularly critical thinking, AI literacy, and disciplinary expertise, that enable individuals to convert AI-generated language into institutionally valued communication.

At the same time, participants overwhelmingly questioned the assumption that generative AI democratizes educational opportunity. Instead, they argued that AI tends to advantage students who already possess strong English proficiency, digital literacy, and access to technological resources, thereby reproducing existing educational inequalities through new mechanisms.

Although several participants acknowledged that freely available AI tools expand access to knowledge, they consistently argued that effective use depends upon prior resources. Participant 1 observed that while “a student in a village with a smartphone can now use ChatGPT”, meaningful benefits still require reliable internet, digital literacy, and critical evaluation skills. Besides, Participant 7 described AI as “a force multiplier”, suggesting that students with stronger linguistic and technological foundations benefit disproportionately, whereas weaker students often use AI merely to complete assignments rather than deepen learning. Similar concerns were raised regarding unequal access to devices, internet connectivity, and educational support.

These accounts reinforce the central theoretical proposition of this study. Rather than functioning as a universal equalizer, AI appears to redistribute advantage according to individuals’ capacity to strategically mobilize linguistic and technological resources. Consequently, AI-mediated linguistic capital is unequally accumulated because its acquisition depends upon access to existing forms of linguistic, digital, educational, and cultural capital. AI therefore restructures rather than removes the mechanisms through which communicative inequality is reproduced.

Finally, participants demonstrated remarkable consensus that future employability will depend neither on English proficiency alone nor on AI skills in isolation, but on the strategic integration of both. This convergence provides the strongest empirical support for the study’s proposed concept of AI-mediated linguistic capital.

Almost every participant argued that English and AI are becoming mutually reinforcing rather than competing competencies. Participant 1 explained that English without AI would produce “a slow, manual worker”, whereas AI without English would prevent effective communication with global stakeholders. Equally, Participant 2 argued that “the magic is in the middle”, while Participant 4 described future employability as resting on three interconnected competencies: English proficiency, AI skills, and critical thinking. Although several participants additionally emphasized creativity, empathy, multilingualism, and ethical responsibility, these were consistently presented as complementary human capacities that enhance rather than replace AI-assisted communication.

Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that the value of English is not diminishing but becoming increasingly intertwined with AI literacy. The empirical evidence therefore supports the conceptualization of AI-mediated linguistic capital as a hybrid communicative resource through which individuals strategically integrate English proficiency, AI literacy, and higher-order judgment to generate educational and occupational advantage. Rather than signalling the decline of English, generative AI is transforming the conditions under which linguistic capital is accumulated, recognized, and converted into employability within emerging digital linguistic markets.

5. Refinement of AI-Mediated Linguistic Capital

Empirical analysis refines the proposed concept of AI-mediated linguistic capital by demonstrating that it operates as a multidimensional process through which individuals transform English proficiency and AI literacy into educational and professional advantage. Rather than treating AI as a substitute for linguistic competence, the framework conceptualizes communicative value as emerging from the strategic interaction between human expertise and generative AI.

The refined framework comprises five interrelated operational dimensions: (1) AI interaction competence, referring to the ability to effectively prompt and engage with AI systems; (2) critical AI evaluation, involving the assessment of the accuracy, relevance, and credibility of AI-generated outputs; (3) human refinement and contextualization, whereby AI outputs are adapted through disciplinary knowledge, audience awareness, and personal judgment; (4) strategic communication integration, referring to the purposeful incorporation of AI-assisted language into academic and professional communication; and (5) ethical and reflective judgment, encompassing responsible AI use, academic integrity, and awareness of the broader implications of AI-mediated communication.

Together, these dimensions illustrate that AI-mediated linguistic capital is accumulated not through AI use alone but through the capacity to strategically mobilize, evaluate, and integrate AI-assisted language within institutionally valued contexts. Figure 1 summarizes the operational relationship among these dimensions.

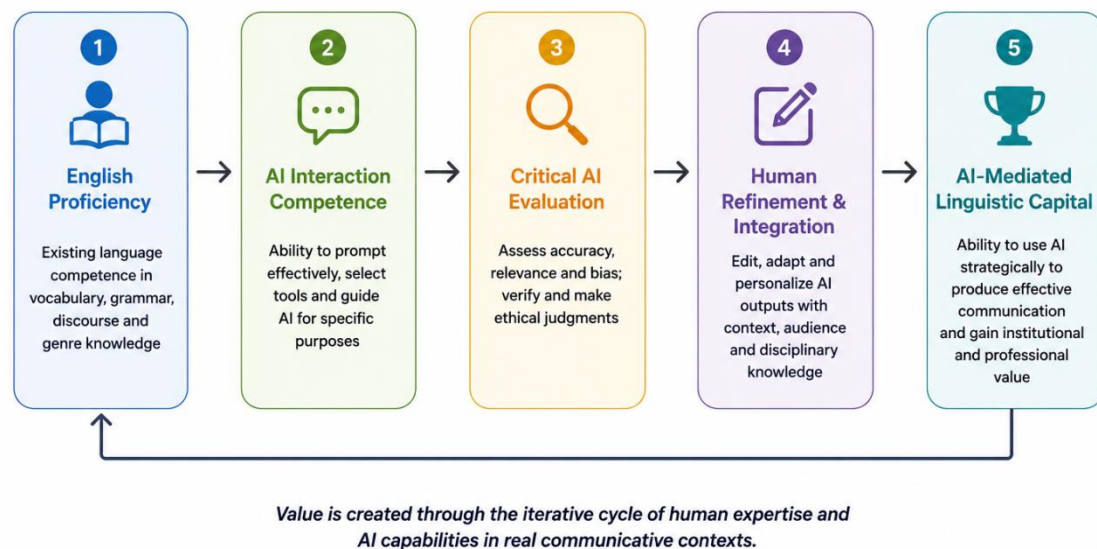


Figure 1. *Operational Model of AI-Mediated Linguistic Capital*

The refined framework extends Bourdieu's theory by demonstrating that linguistic capital is increasingly realized through the interaction between English proficiency and AI literacy. In AI-mediated communicative fields, linguistic advantage depends less on producing language independently than on the strategic orchestration of human judgment and algorithmic assistance to create contextually appropriate, credible, and socially recognized communication.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how generative AI is reshaping the value of English proficiency among Bangladeshi tertiary EFL students through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital. The findings demonstrate that generative AI has not diminished the importance of English; rather, it has transformed the forms of linguistic competence that are most highly valued in academic and professional contexts. While AI increasingly automates routine linguistic tasks such as grammar correction, translation, and text generation, participants consistently emphasized that higher-order competencies, including critical thinking, contextual interpretation, strategic communication, and ethical judgment, remain fundamentally human and increasingly valuable.

Building on these findings, the study advances Bourdieu's framework by proposing AI-mediated linguistic capital, a hybrid form of capital in which the value of English is realized through the strategic integration of linguistic competence and AI literacy. Unlike conventional linguistic capital, whose exchange value depended primarily on individual language proficiency, AI-mediated linguistic capital is accumulated through the ability to critically evaluate, refine, and strategically mobilize AI-generated communication. Participants further indicated that while AI narrows certain performance gaps, particularly in written communication, it does not substitute for the embodied communicative competence required for spontaneous interaction, collaboration, negotiation, and professional decision-making. Linguistic inequality, therefore, is being reconfigured rather than eliminated.

Beyond this theoretical contribution, the findings reveal an important paradox. Although generative AI expands access to linguistic resources, its effective use depends on existing English proficiency, digital literacy, critical thinking, and access to

technological infrastructure. As a result, AI is unlikely to democratize educational opportunity on its own. Instead, it may reproduce, or even intensify, existing educational and socioeconomic inequalities by creating new mechanisms through which linguistic advantage is accumulated, converted, and institutionally recognized.

Important implications also emerge for language education and higher education policy. English language instruction should move beyond prioritizing grammatical accuracy to cultivating critical AI literacy, prompt design, information evaluation, ethical AI use, and advanced communicative competence. Likewise, universities should prepare students not only to communicate effectively in English but also to collaborate strategically with AI technologies in increasingly digital academic and professional environments.

Finally, this study is limited by its small sample of English-major students from a single private university and by the absence of direct employer interviews or labour-market data to substantiate claims about changing employment expectations. Accordingly, employability-related interpretations should be understood as exploratory observations informed by market developments and participant accounts. Future research could address this limitation through larger, more diverse samples and by incorporating employer perspectives, labour-market data, and longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to further examine how AI-mediated linguistic capital develops and is valued across educational and professional contexts.

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