

## Effect of Cultural Capital on Linguistic Performance of ESL Learners

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### Abstract

*The present study investigates the relationship between linguistic performance and cultural capital of English Second Language (ESL) Learners. The participants of the present study are the school students from Rural Assam. There are a total of 113 participants from two government schools. The medium of instruction as well as the communication among the students takes place in the local language i.e. Assamese. A linguistic performance test set is devised which is adapted from Fromkin (2018). In addition to that, the participant's response to Cultural Capital Scale is recorded. This recorded scale of cultural capital is used as a factor while analyzing the linguistic performance. Unlike other studies, our result reports no correlation between the linguistic performance and cultural capital of the learners.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Capital, ESL, Indian Classroom, Linguistic Performance

### Introduction

The English language has become a *lingua franca* in the twenty-first century. It is widely used for international communication. There are a variety of factors that impact English Second language learning viz. the learners' first language, adequate methodology, the context of learning, etc. The researches suggest the impact of cultural capital on the educational success of students (Dumais, 2002; Kiley, 2019). In contrast to learners with less cultural capital, learners with higher cultural capital are found academically more successful (Dumais & Ward, 2010). EFL learners' cultural capital has a positive impact on all the dimensions (listening, reading, speaking, writing, and grammar skills) of English Language learning (Pishghadam et. al., 2011).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital helps us in understanding the variations and inequality in academic achievements of students belonging to different socio-economic classes. Individuals acquire certain skills, knowledge, education, and mannerism from their family's attitude, social standing, and educational background. The cultural capital of an individual refers to the collection of the components an individual possesses being a part of a class (Bourdieu, 1971). Bourdieu divides the cultural capital of an individual into three categories namely- i) embodied, ii) objective, and, iii) institutionalized. Embodied refers to the dominant traits (preferences), mannerisms, and language of an individual. For example, knowing which car to buy, or knowing which fork to use, or not saying "aks" in a job interview. It is subject to "hereditary transmission" and is heavily disguised. The objective capital refers to the possession of cultural goods like pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, mobile phones, and access to the internet, for example, availability of multimedia mobile phones or access to the internet. The institutional capital refers to the formal recognition from institutions like the possession of academic qualifications and certifications. This in turn transforms into economic capital in the labor market. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) applied these three factors in education, consumption, and taste. Students with dominant cultural skills are bound to perform better in education, have more career success since they are already familiar with the skills required from their social background.

The rural second language learners do not have many resources for learning the English language as compared to the urban learners (Roy, 2017). Moreover, the rural environment does not provide the opportunity to speak and learn the English language. The learners learn English as a second language without getting the atmosphere for practical use. Generally, the parents of urban ESL learners are educated and hence the domestic environment adds an advantage for them in the acquisition of the

English language. Unlike urban ESL learners, rural English learners are typically first-generation English learners. The rural learners also don't get to read a lot in English books, magazines, or the use of the internet. Since these resources are rarely available. These learners are highly dependent on their teachers. While most of the English language teachers are not trained and updated with the recent advances in the area of English language teaching. The intriguing aspect that comes out of the study of Bourdieu and Roy is that there is no fine-grain differentiation of cultural capital in rural settings. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the relationship between rural English language learners' performance and their cultural capital in the Indian classroom context.

### Research Question

Is there any significant relationship between ESL learners' linguistic performance and their cultural capital?

Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ): There exists a significant relationship between ESL learner's linguistic performance and cultural capital.

Alternate Hypothesis ( $H_a$ ): There is no significant relationship between ESL learner's linguistic performance and cultural capital.

### Related Works

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social and cultural capitals has influenced many research works concerning diverse aspects of human lives. Many research suggests the impact of cultural capital on the educational success of students (Dumais, 2002; Kiley, 2019; DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). In contrast to learners with less cultural capital, learners with higher cultural capital are found academically more successful (Dumais & Ward, 2010).

Several researchers have investigated the impact of English Second Language learners' capitals on English language performance (see De, 2017; Khodadady, 2016; Pishghadam, 2011; Salameh, 2012). These studies have claimed that the learners' capital plays a significant role in the success and failure of English language performance among ESL learners. EFL Learners' cultural capital played a positive correlation with their foreign language achievement (Pishghadam et.al, 2011).

ESL learners in Indian classrooms belong to different social classes and therefore, possess varying levels of cultural capital. There is a huge gap between the cultural capital of different social classes which reproduces inequality (Bourdieu, 1971). This inequality on the other hand is perceived as a merit for the upper and the middle classes (ibid). The ability to learn English is an expensive process which only the upper and the middle classes can afford. Knowing and mastering the English language is a cultural capital and it reproduces class inequality (Malik, 2014). Parents and students manage institutional encounters in different ways. This specialized skill of parents is what gets transmitted across generations and is a source of advantage for a specific category of people (Lareau, 2003). The linguistic ability of learners gets transmitted more from their background than from their institutions (Sullivan, 2001).

Teacher's cultural capital contributes to the success of learning the English language by the students (Hassanzadeh, 2017). It is the teachers who provide the inputs for learning the target language to the ESL learners in the rural areas (Roy, 2017). However, the urban ESL learners who have better chances of getting exposure to the language outside the classroom whether it be at home from parents or the resources like English novels, newspapers, etc. There is a lack of the resources used for teaching ESL in Indian classrooms (ibid). Using a textbook for 20 years, the use of traditional teaching methods does not add much to the learner's expertise (Hassanzadeh, 2017). With the growth of rapid technological advances, the divide between the rural and urban is still intact. The new technological resources are not penetrated in the rural classrooms.

Cultural capital plays an important role in the performance of English language learners coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Lack of cultural capital may obstruct English Second language learners especially from working-class families from educational success. ESL learners need support during their learning process- at different stages in the transition period. An appreciation of various styles and cultures in the classroom can play a positive influence (Kiley, 2019). The rural population perceives their English learning as an investment and an advantage for getting jobs and being educated in the real sense (Teng, 2017).

## Method

### Participants and Setting

113 ESL learners participated in the present study. Out of 113, 82 are female and 31 are male students. The participants are undergraduate students of two government colleges in the Kamrup district of Assam (India). The age range of the learners is from 17-19 years. The learners completed their primary and upper primary schooling in vernacular government schools. These schools used to teach English from the fifth standard. Later it was introduced in the third standard. Therefore the participants have significant exposure to English language learning. The participants are L1 Assamese speakers and still communicate in Assamese in the classroom.

| College Code | Participants | GENDER |        |
|--------------|--------------|--------|--------|
|              |              | Male   | Female |
| College A    | 50           | 24     | 26     |
| College B    | 63           | 7      | 56     |
|              | 113          | 31     | 82     |

**Table 1:** The gender wise distribution of participants in both the colleges

### Instruments

To measure the level of ESL learners' linguistic competence, the present study conducted a linguistic performance test. The cultural capital of the ESL learners was surveyed by using the Cultural Capital Scale from Pishghadam's "Social and Cultural Capital Questionnaire" (SCCQ). The total (cumulative) English language achievement scores were obtained from the learners' linguistic performance test to explore the relationship between cultural capitals and English language achievement.

#### A. Linguistic performance test

The "linguistic test" was conducted to measure the ESL learner's linguistic knowledge at the word and sentence level in English. It comprises a cloze test which looks into the recognition of correct and incorrect words and sentences. The word recognition test consists of simple and complex words. The sentence recognition test consists of a word order test, a syntactic rule for verb test, and a grammaticality test. The linguistic test consists of fourteen marks. The test was administered by the researcher in about 15 minutes

#### B. Cultural Capital Scale

The cultural capital of the ESL learners was measured by using the Cultural Capital Scale (CCS) as described in the Social and Cultural Capital Questionnaire (SCCQ) proposed by Pishghadam (2011). The CCS comprised thirteen factors which are divided into two sub-scales: Literacy and Cultural Competence. Literacy comprised six factors, while cultural competence comprised seven factors. These factors were measured using a five-point Likert scale which ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A "strongly agree" response received five points, "agree"

received four points, “undecided” received three points, “disagree” received two points, and “strongly disagree” received one point.

### Procedures

The data collection session was organized post-lunch on a working day. Each participant was given an additional 30 minutes post-lunch before appearing in the session. A written questionnaire was prepared by the researcher. The researcher personally distributed the questionnaires in the form of a hard copy to the participants. The objective of the study is not disclosed to the participants. Each participant was given an hour to finish the questionnaires. However, most of them had finished it in 30-45 minutes. The questionnaires examined two variables of the study: cultural capital was the independent variable, and linguistic performance was considered as the dependent variable.

### Results

The descriptive statistics of schools A and B are shown below in Table 2. It is interesting to note that the mean of both the variables is above 0.5 and the mode is very close to the mean. Moreover, the other properties of distribution can be analyzed by the value of kurtosis and the skewness shown in the following table.

| School A | Linguistic Performance | Cultural Capital | School B | Linguistic Performance | Cultural Capital |
|----------|------------------------|------------------|----------|------------------------|------------------|
| Mean     | 0.625                  | 0.589            | Mean     | 0.586                  | 0.506            |
| Mode     | 0.642                  | 0.485            | Mode     | 0.642                  | 0.571            |
| Median   | 0.642                  | 0.6              | Median   | 0.642                  | 0.571            |
| Variance | 0.009                  | 0.019            | Variance | 0.008                  | 0.0279           |
| SD       | 0.094                  | 0.138            | SD       | 0.091                  | 0.167            |
| Kurtosis | 0.644                  | -0.145           | Kurtosis | 0.272                  | 0.586            |
| Skewness | 0.529                  | -0.366           | Skewness | -0.908                 | -0.977           |

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics of Linguistic Performance and Cultural Capital; SD denotes “Standard Deviation”

The correlation of linguistic performance and cultural capital is computed for both schools. The data of each school is divided into two parts based on the mean value of the linguistic performance and then the correlation is computed for each part. Finally, the correlation of each school is the average of the correlation value of both parts. The value of correlation is shown below in Table 2.

| School | Correlation |
|--------|-------------|
| A      | -0.01       |
| B      | 0.18        |
| Both   | 0.17        |

**Table 3:** Correlation of Linguistic Performance and Cultural Capital

### Conclusion and Future Works

The present study is based on the null hypothesis that the EFL learners' cultural capital has a positive impact on all the dimensions (e.g., listening, reading, speaking, writing, and grammar skills) of English Language learning (Pishghadam et. al, 2011). However, the result of the correlation between linguistic performance and cultural capital rejects the null hypothesis. Our alternate hypothesis suggests that cultural competence has almost no effect on linguistic performance in rural settings. The reason is that it is quite difficult to establish the cultural competence gap among the students or subjects. The future work will investigate the cultural competence gap required to have a positive impact on linguistic performance.

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