

# Unraveling the Socio-Cultural Tapestry of English Language Learning: Personal Experiences, Hollywood's Influence, and Societal Dynamics in Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

මෙම පර්යේෂණය සංස්කෘතික හා දෘෂ්ටිවාදාත්මක මානයන් සමඟ භාෂාමය කුසලතා ඇතුළත් ඉංග්‍රීසි ඉගනුම් ක්‍රියාවලිය සුක්ෂ්ම ව සොයා බලයි. පුද්ගලික අත්දැකීම් සමාජ ජීවිත තත්ත්වය අවධාරණාත්මකව පිරික්සීම සහ භාෂා උකහාගැනීම කෙරෙහි සංස්කෘතික බලපෑම් වෙත අවධානය යොමු කර ඇත. හොලිවුඩයේ පරිවර්තනීය භූමිකාව Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) හරහා විග්‍රහ කෙරේ. භාෂාමය හැකියාවන් කෙරෙහි එහි බලපෑම ඉස්මතු කරයි. පර්යේෂණය ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවේ සමාජ විද්‍යාත්මක මානයන් විමර්ශනය කරයි. පර්යේෂණ ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවේ සමාජවිද්‍යාත්මක මානයන් විමර්ශනය කරයි. සංස්කෘතික භාවිතයන් සමාජ ආකල්ප සහ අධ්‍යාපනයේ ගතිකතාවයන් සමඟ ඇති බැඳීම පරීක්ෂා කරයි. ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ ඉංග්‍රීසි අතීතය සමාජ කීර්තියට එහි ඇති සම්බන්ධය සහ කෙල්නර්ගේ න්‍යාය සමඟ සමපාත වූ විවේචනාත්මක ගවේෂණයක් සිදු කෙරේ. පර්යේෂණය සංස්කෘතික සංවේදීතාවල ඒකාබද්ධ කිරීම වෙනුවෙන් පෙනී සිටී. මෙම පර්යේෂණ ඉංග්‍රීසි ඉගෙනීම සංස්කෘතික බලපෑම් සහ සමාජ ගතිකත්වය අතර ඇති සංකීර්ණ සම්බන්ධය පිළිබඳ අවබෝධය ගැඹුරු කිරීම අරමුණ කරයි.

ප්‍රමුඛ පද: ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂා ඉගෙනීම, සංස්කෘතික බලපෑම්, දෘෂ්ටිවාදාත්මක මානයන්, ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ බල ගතිකත්වය, සමාජ විවේචනාත්මක භාෂා ශික්ෂණය

**Key-words:** English language learning, cultural influences,

ideological dimensions, power dynamics in Sri Lanka, societal pressures, critical language pedagogy.

## **Introduction**

Embarking on the journey of learning a new language involves more than the mere acquisition of linguistic skills; it is a nuanced exploration of the associated values, norms, and cultural nuances. This article delves into my personal experiences as an English student, emphasizing the profound impact of cultural and ideological components on language acquisition. The decision to learn English was steered by my parents' foresight, driven by the societal perception that proficiency in English is synonymous with elevated status and societal acceptance. This narrative resonates with the broader societal pressure, where lacking proficiency in English is stigmatized and individuals risk social exclusion. This study intricately examines the trajectory of English language learning, intertwining personal experiences with a theoretical backdrop.

## **Hollywood's Influential Role**

A pivotal facet of my English language journey was the significant exposure to English movie materials, particularly through the "Saturday Night movies" segment on ITN (Independent Television Network). Hollywood, as a potent cultural and ideological apparatus, played a transformative role in shaping my linguistic capabilities. Drawing from Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), Hollywood disseminated specific ideologies and cultural representations through movies and related media products. While Hollywood's influence offered authentic linguistic exposure, it also introduced biases and stereotypes, requiring critical engagement. This article navigates the complexities of Hollywood's impact on language learning, touching upon its portrayal of historical events, cultural diversity, and the influence of Western values.

## **Cultural, Sociological, and Educational Dimensions**

Beyond linguistic proficiency, English is entwined with cultural and sociological practices. This scrutinizes the influence of English on societal attitudes, consumerism, and individualism, often associated with Anglo-Saxon societies. The exploration extends to societal inequalities and power dynamics within English language education, revealing disparities in access, resources, and opportunities. Rooted in the historical legacy of British colonialism, English proficiency is viewed as a symbol of prestige, contributing to social and economic inequality. Drawing parallels with Gramsci's concept of Hegemony, the article reflects on how language becomes a tool for maintaining cultural control. The Critical theory of education, as proposed by Kellner, becomes a lens through which to critically evaluate and challenge prevailing norms and power relations in the process of learning English. In conclusion, this reflective work aims to unravel the intricate connection between learning English, cultural influences, and societal dynamics, guided by relevant theoretical frameworks and personal experiences.

## **Review of Literature**

Learning a new language transcends linguistic acquisition, encompassing a profound interaction with the associated values, norms, and culture. The article underlines the significance of parental influence, portraying English as a status symbol crucial for societal recognition. Societal pressures, aligning with Bourdieu's cultural capital, enforce conformity to prevailing beliefs, shaping the trajectory of English learning (Bourdieu, 1990). The literature highlights the intertwining of personal narratives with theoretical frameworks to elucidate the nuanced process of learning English.

Media, particularly Hollywood, emerges as a potent force in the author's language acquisition journey. Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) is invoked to dissect Hollywood's role as an ideological apparatus disseminating Western ideals (Althusser, 1970). The literature review underscores the need for a critical lens when engaging with Hollywood content, acknowledging its potential to perpetuate stereotypes and present skewed perspectives (Nash, 1990; Sullivan, 2002). The impact of Hollywood on language learning is evident, with exposure to authentic spoken language patterns and expressions, illustrating the influential role of media in shaping language acquisition (Yavuz & Arikan, 2017).

Moving beyond linguistic aspects, the literature explores the broader sociological influence of English. It delves into the association of English with cultural practices, individualism, materialism, consumerism, and secularism. McCracken's insights are invoked to discuss the potential influence of English on values and attitudes, especially in the context of Western consumerist ideals (McCracken, 1990). The article sheds light on mainstream linguistic norms, emphasizing their hierarchical promotion and the resulting sense of inferiority among non-native English learners. Disparities in English language education are exposed, emphasizing the unequal distribution of resources, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas (Alwis, 2008; Jayasuriya, 2002).

The historical legacy of English in Sri Lanka, rooted in its colonial past, is discussed, linking English proficiency to social prestige and upward mobility (Hettiarachchy, 2011). The author's critical perspective, aligned with Kellner's Critical Theory of Education, becomes evident. This critical approach encourages the active questioning of prevailing ideologies and power relations in education (Kellner, 2003). The literature

review concludes by spotlighting the author's proactive stance in seeking diverse, alternative resources for a more inclusive and critical approach to language learning, moving beyond traditional textbooks.

## **Research Problem**

The study aims to investigate the multifaceted impact of English language learning, exploring the cultural, ideological, and sociological dimensions experienced by students. The research seeks to understand how cultural influences, particularly through media, shape language acquisition, and how societal inequalities manifest in English language education. The overarching problem revolves around unraveling the complexities embedded in the process of learning English, examining its implications on individuals' values, perceptions, and societal structures.

## **Aims of the Research**

1. To examine the Impact of Cultural and Sociological Influences on English Language Learning.
2. To critically Analyze Hollywood's Role in Shaping Language and Cultural Perspectives.
3. To explore the Societal Inequalities and Power Dynamics in English Language Education.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this study involves a meticulous selection of materials to investigate the multifaceted process of philosophical and sociological arena in learning English, with a focus on personal experiences and the cultural-ideological dimensions of studying English as a student. The primary source of influence identified is reflective which is qualitative

and reference to the secondary sources which is qualitative and quantitative. A critical examination conducted, emphasizing the potential for sociological basis biases and theologies related to Sri Lanka. The study further explores the broader association of English with cultural practices and values. Reflective analysis is integrated, addressing challenges faced opportunities and disparities in English language education contributing to social and economic inequality. The application of Gramsci's concept of Hegemony and Kellner's Critical Theory of Education enhances the understanding of power dynamics and biases in the English learning journey.

### **Importance of the Research**

The research is crucial for understanding the intricate relationship between English language learning, cultural influences, and societal dynamics. It sheds light on the impact of cultural and ideological components on language acquisition, emphasizing the need for a critical approach. The findings contribute to enhance cultural sensitivity in language education, addressing socioeconomic disparities, and promoting a transformative, inclusive language pedagogy. Ultimately, the research seeks to pave the way for more equitable and effective approaches to English language learning in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

### **Discussion**

Learning a new language entails more than just picking up a new set of linguistic skills. It also comes with getting into contact with the values, norms, and culture related to that particular language. This article will focus on my personal experiences studying English as a student, particularly in connection to the cultural and ideological components of the language.

My parents' forethought enabled me to begin learning English. They perceive English as a tool of status as a result of all the social and cultural interactions that have led them to believe that English is the portal to the “greatness”. Society has shamed people for not knowing English and will be shunned from the social milieu. These beliefs made us conform to the popular belief which I am a part of. On that note, the process of pursuing English will be discussed through experience with incorporating the theoretical background.

The most influential mode of English learning that I encountered was the constant exposure to English movie materials from a very young age. I encountered English movies through “Saturday Night movies” segment of ITN (Independent Television Network) since grade 5. Hollywood played an essential part in my language acquisition journey. I became acquainted with English through Hollywood films and television series, which constituted an important element of my language-learning experience. These media materials showcased native speakers and their linguistic styles while presenting a certain version of the English language.

Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) can be applied to this kind of influence hampered upon English learning. Hollywood functions as an ideological apparatus, disseminating specific ideologies and representations through its movies and related media products (Althusser, 1970). These representations frequently reflect dominant Western ideals, lifestyles, and attitudes, which might influence how English learners perceive language and cultural environments. Because of the accessibility, availability, and popularity of American movies and television series in my language-learning journey, I was exposed to the English language in authentic settings, allowing me to study native speakers'

pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and cultural references. Hollywood's influence on language learning was most visible in how it helped me understand colloquial terms, slang terms, idioms, and other informal and formal language repressive interaction methods. This mode of education is evident according to Yavuz and Arikan (2017), English movies contributed to the development of learners' speaking skills by providing exposure to authentic spoken language patterns and expressions.

Hollywood movies also provided insights on Western and American culture, societal standards, and values. I received exposure to western cultural practices, lifestyles, and historical events via exposure to movies and TV series, which provided a larger cultural backdrop that supplemented my language acquisition. It's important to note, however, that Hollywood's portrayal of culture may often be glorified or stereotyped, and as an English learner, with a broadened world view, I need to critically examine and engage with the content to obtain a more nuanced view. One example of propaganda and bias in Hollywood films that I encountered was the depiction of American wars. Mostly after the 9/11 attacks, the "war on terror" was discussed. Movies like "American Sniper" have been criticized for giving a skewed view of the Iraq War, glorifying American soldiers while downplaying the intricacies and effects of the conflict (Nash, 1990). As an English learner, such films could distort historical events and propagate a one-sided perspective. Furthermore, Hollywood has a history of portraying minorities unfairly, promoting stereotypes, and marginalizing disadvantaged groups. For example, the character Long Duk Dong in the film "Sixteen Candles" has been heavily condemned for portraying an Asian character in a racially insensitive manner, perpetuating damaging stereotypes, and contributing to the marginalization of Asian populations (Sullivan, 2002). As an English learning student, encountering such portrayals can lead to a limited and skewed understanding of cultural diversity.

On the broader perspective, English is also often associated with cultural and sociological practices such as individualism, materialism, consumerism, and secularism, which are frequently associated with Anglo-Saxon societies to which I was exposed in English movies. According to McCracken(1990) English-proficient students are frequently exposed to Western consumerist ideals via literature, cinema, and popular culture. This exposure has the potential to affect their values, attitudes, and desires, resulting in material possessions as a means of obtaining social recognition and success and being relevant. This is evident through the rapid increase of American fast food chains in Sri Lanka. This may have a bearing on me as well, and I am conscious of it now. This also introduced me to the mainstream linguistic norms and standards. I learned the right so-called way of adhering to the conventions followed by native English speakers. These criteria were frequently promoted as the "correct" or "ideal" manner of using the language, maintaining a linguistic hierarchy that placed native English speakers at the top. This fostered a sense of inferiority or inadequacy in non-native English learners, prolonging the dominance of English-speaking cultures. As my English studies evolved, I learned the significance of critically engaging with the language and the ideals it conveys. I began to examine the cultural prejudices and power dynamics that were ingrained in my English language acquisition. I attempted to widen my comprehension by looking beyond the specified curriculum that is used by Sri Lanka in default as the resources for English Language and literature. Engaging with different ideas and opinions allowed me to question the limited worldview that had been offered to me.

The path to English learning was littered with potholes. Being from a remote area and receiving an education from a government-funded central college heightened the prejudices in gaining recognition and accessing certain privileged

opportunities at the national level. For example, Certain national-level simulated delegate conferences which can act as a platform of English practices were made available to us with limited access, and even within that window of opportunity, we obtained leftover or insignificant participation. I witnessed this clear schism of opportunity and the primacy given to particular upper-echelon schools. These schools have the innate background of English medium and English education which they hoist on a pedestal and was different from over proficiency on those times. This norm these schools maintained in English language proficiency has become a crucial factor in accessing quality education and socio-economic opportunities in that case. Disparities in English language education, on the other hand, contribute to the continuation of inequality. This was explained as follows: access to high-quality English education is restricted to urban and privileged schools, hence reinforcing existing social divisions (Alwis, 2008). In English language education, unequal distribution of resources and infrastructure contributes to educational inequality. In rural and economically disadvantaged areas, government schools frequently lack skilled teachers, textbooks, and language learning materials (Jayasuriya, 2002). Adding to that, the dominance of English in curriculum and evaluation, as I have witnessed, severely marginalizes students from non-English language backgrounds. The colonial history of Sri Lanka under British monarch has had a long-lasting impact on the country's prominence of English. During the colonial era, English was established as the language of authority, administration, and education. Because of this historical legacy, English has maintained its importance and influence in all aspects of Sri Lankan society (Hettiarachchy, 2011). The teaching of English in Sri Lanka has historically been connected with power and privilege as a result of the colonial legacy. English proficiency is sometimes regarded as a sign of prestige and upward mobility.

That was realized by my parents the source of encouragement was them. adding to that, This impression creates a hierarchy in which people who are fluent in English have an advantage in terms of educational options and work opportunities. In Sri Lanka, the unequal distribution of opportunities based on English language competency contributes to the continuation of social and economic inequality. This coincides with Gramsci's concept of Hegemony. Gramsci (1971) introduced the idea of hegemony to explain how dominant groups maintain power by securing the assent of inferior groups. Hegemony entails the active participation of subordinate groups in the reproduction of dominant cultural practices and values. Gramsci claimed that language is a significant instrument used by dominant classes to build and maintain ideological and cultural control over society. In the instance of learning English, I experienced the effect of engaging with the dominant cultural practices and values associated with the language, even if they were unfamiliar or incompatible with my own practices and beliefs. As someone who encountered this social division previously and was privileged in upward social mobility because of English, I try not to act like an individual of the dominant class and to comply with the prejudices they uphold.

This critical perspective that I associated with coincides the Critical theory of education. This critical theory of education, established by Kellner (2003), emphasizes the necessity of engaging students in critical reflection on the dominant values, norms, and cultural practices related to the subjects they study. According to Kellner, education should be a site of challenge and opposition against prevailing ideology and power relations. When I was studying English, I was not explicitly encouraged to engage in critical evaluation of the language's domination and cultural norms. Rather, I was meant to internalize and duplicate them without challenging their validity or relevance. Now that

I have a broader grasp of the consequences of English, I have worked to distance from these power dynamics and biases by actively seeking diverse, alternative resources and engaging in critical discussions. I have explored alternative materials, such as literature from various cultural backgrounds like African authors and Sri Lankan English publications, Not just from the inner circle of norm setters, independent media, and authentic language sources beyond traditional textbooks. This has given me a broader awareness of the English language and its increasing cultural settings, enabling a more inclusive and critical approach to language learning.

In conclusion, learning English as a student entails more than just picking up a new set of language skills. It also entails coming into contact with the language's dominant values, conventions, propaganda's and cultural practices. my reflective work has explored the values and norms that I experienced with the English language and how these were learned, internalized, and criticized to create my own inclusive perception, drawing on Althusser's concept of ideology and ideological state apparatus, Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Kellner's critical theory of education, and other relevant literature.

### **Parental Influence and Societal Pressures**

The decision to learn English, influenced by societal perceptions, aligns with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990). The societal pressure to conform to English proficiency as a status symbol echoes the enforcement of cultural norms. Parents' foresight in steering language acquisition reflects the broader societal expectations, setting the trajectory of English learning (Bourdieu, 1990).

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## **Media Influence**

Hollywood, as a cultural and ideological apparatus, significantly shapes language acquisition. Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) provides a lens to dissect Hollywood's influence, acknowledging its role in disseminating Western ideals (Althusser, 1970). Exposure to authentic language patterns through movies contributes to language development (Yavuz & Arikan, 2017). However, a critical engagement with Hollywood content is crucial, as it can perpetuate stereotypes and present biased perspectives (Nash, 1990; Sullivan, 2002).

## **Sociological Dimensions of English**

Beyond linguistic proficiency, English is entwined with cultural and sociological practices. McCracken's insights highlight the potential influence of English on values and attitudes, particularly in promoting Western consumerist ideals (McCracken, 1990). The essay illuminates mainstream linguistic norms, emphasizing their hierarchical promotion and the resulting sense of inferiority among non-native English learners. Disparities in English language education contribute to educational inequality, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas (Alwis, 2008; Jayasuriya, 2002).

## **Historical Legacy in Sri Lanka**

The historical legacy of English in Sri Lanka, rooted in colonialism, links English proficiency to social prestige and upward mobility (Hettiarachchy, 2011). The author's critical perspective aligns with Kellner's Critical Theory of Education, emphasizing the active questioning of prevailing ideologies and power relations in education (Kellner, 2003).

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## **Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony**

The article recognizes the application of Gramsci's concept of Hegemony in understanding how English proficiency contributes to maintaining cultural control. English, as a symbol of prestige, creates a hierarchy, advantaging those fluent in the language (Gramsci, 1971).

## **Kellner's Critical Theory of Education**

The author's critical approach aligns with Kellner's Critical Theory of Education, emphasizing the necessity of engaging students in critical reflection on dominant values and cultural practices related to the subjects they study (Kellner, 2003). Seeking diverse resources and engaging in critical discussions illustrates the active opposition to prevailing norms.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis unravels the intricate connection between learning English, cultural influences, and societal dynamics. Drawing from personal experiences and theoretical frameworks, it highlights the need for a critical lens in navigating the complexities of language acquisition within socio-cultural contexts.

### **1. Cultivate Cultural Sensitivity in Language Learning**

Implement a curriculum that integrates cultural sensitivity into English language education. This involves exposing students to a diverse range of cultural materials, literature, and media beyond Western-centric content. Teachers should guide students in critically analyzing cultural representations, challenging stereotypes, and fostering an appreciation for linguistic diversity. Cultural competence can be woven into language lessons, encouraging students to explore languages within their cultural context rather than as isolated linguistic entities.

## 2. Address Socioeconomic Disparities in English Education

Develop targeted initiatives to bridge the socioeconomic gap in access to quality English education. This includes allocating resources to schools in rural and economically disadvantaged areas, ensuring well-trained English teachers, providing up-to-date learning materials, and facilitating extracurricular language programs. By addressing these disparities, English language proficiency becomes a more equitable tool for social and economic mobility, reducing the perpetuation of privilege linked to language proficiency.

## 3. Integrate Critical Language Pedagogy

Embed critical language pedagogy principles into English language teaching methodologies. Educators should encourage students to question, analyze, and engage critically with the cultural, societal, and historical dimensions of language. This approach aligns with Kellner's Critical Theory of Education, fostering a classroom environment that challenges dominant norms, promotes inclusivity, and equips students with the skills to navigate language learning with a discerning perspective. Professional development programs for teachers should prioritize training in critical language pedagogy to enhance their ability to facilitate these transformative learning experiences.

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