

THE CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE AS CULTURAL CAPITAL IN PUNJABI CLASSROOMS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The language is at the centre stage in determining the experiences in education and social mobility, especially in multilingual cultures like India. In addition to being a medium of communication, language is a representation of cultural capital; it affects academic performance and social status. The concept of language as cultural capital is discussed in this paper in the context of Punjabi classrooms, looking at the status and prestige of Punjabi in the education and family realms. The paper will use theories related to language acquisition, socio-economic factors, and educational disparity to gain deeper insight into this topic with the help of the theory of cultural capital, offered by Pierre Bourdieu, and the viewpoints of critical pedagogy. The paper claims that the prestige of Punjabi over the leading and dominant languages like English and Hindi has a strong influence on the linguistic identity of students, their participation, and their education opportunities. By placing the practices of the Punjabi language in the context of the wider social-economic and cultural frameworks, the framework illustrates the role of linguistic hierarchies in creating inequality in education. The paper ends with the point that there is a necessity to understand that Punjabi is an important educational source and cultural capital in the multilingual classes.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, cultural capital, linguistic inequality, multilingual education Punjabi language, language policy

Introduction

One of the most important aspects influencing the educational experience in the multilingual society is the language. The linguistic diversity in India is correlated with complicated levels of prestige and power, which determine educational opportunities and social mobility. An example of this is English which is generally linked to modernization, economic opportunities and global communication as opposed to regional languages which are mostly linked with cultural values though less institutional (Annamalai, 2004). Sociologically, one can interpret language as a sort of cultural capital that defines the educational performance and social stratification. Cultural capital is defined as the symbolic resources of language and knowledge and social dispositions that are appreciated at the institutional level (Bourdieu, 1986). Students that have language capital acknowledged by the learning institutions have high chances of performing better in school since their language practices are in line with the institutions' expectations.

The latest research highlighted that linguistic capital makes a substantial impact on the learning process of students and the reproduction of social inequalities in the education system (Riordan, 2024; Feng, 2025). Studies also show that academic performance is frequently determined by family background and lingual resources and upholds the already established socio-economic divisions (Spernes, 2019). Applying to the situation in Punjab, Punjabi is a cultural signifier as well as a common speech language. Nevertheless, the growing prominence of English-language education has transformed the attitude towards Punjabi in the schools. English proficiency is linked to financial

mobility and international opportunity by many families because it may result in the relegation of local languages in formal education settings (Baath and Takhar, 2024). The given paper works on the theoretical framework to study the language as cultural capital within Punjabi classrooms and determine the importance of prestige and institutional status of the Punjabi language to language acquisition, socio-economic and educational inequalities.

Literature Review

Educational Inequality and Language

The language is strictly connected with the educational opportunities and social mobility. The argument of scholars is that in situations when schools favour specific languages, students with lingual minorities can also be disadvantaged in terms of academic performance and involvement (Cummins, 2021). Linguistic diversity among students is frequently manifested in the multilingual classrooms where institutional language policies are unable to acknowledge the linguistic diversity of students. The research of linguistic capital proves that academic achievement and social class disparity may be supported by language proficiency (Spernes, 2019). Linguistic capital is an intermediary between family background and academic success that influences learners to get access to knowledge and institutional status.

Cultural Capital and Language

The theory of cultural capital offered by Pierre Bourdieu is a significant contribution to the perception of the way educational systems reproduce any social inequalities. Cultural capital incorporates linguistic skills, cultural competences, and social

practices that are compatible with the prevailing institutional expressions (Bourdieu, 1986). Recent studies still show that Bourdieu's framework has relevance in the modern-day education systems. As an example, Riordan (2024) emphasizes the problem of cultural capital used in schools and the formation of educational results. Equally, Feng (2025) reiterates that linguistic competence is another critical variable that influences the integration and academic performance of students.

Punjabi Language and Educational Backdrop

Punjabi is a language that has been used as a significant cultural and linguistic mark of identity in Punjab in the past. But the trends in the global economic sphere and the changes in educational policies have helped change the views on the use of the language in the schools. The literature review of the topic of the Punjabi language identity indicates that it depends on social, political, and economic factors to see how the language is valued by speakers in the education and everyday life context (Baath and Takhar, 2024). Moreover, the focus on multilingual education has drawn attention to the need to incorporate regional languages into the classroom teaching. The research on multilingual classrooms demonstrates that the acknowledgment of the linguistic background of the students can contribute to the improvement of participation and learning outcomes (Pritam and Singh, 2023).

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how Punjabi is a kind of cultural capital used in the sphere of education and in families.
2. To test how the linguistic hierarchies between Punjabi, Hindi, and English affect the language acquisition of the students.
3. To investigate the connection between socio-economic status and the access of linguistic capital in Punjab classrooms.
4. To use the Bourdieu theory of cultural capital and critical pedagogy in learning inequality in regard to language use.
5. To come up with a theoretical framework of identifying Punjabi as an educational and cultural resource in multilingual classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Cultural Capital Bourdieu proposed a theory of cultural capital, which is commonly referred to as the Bourdieu theory of cultural capital (Lee 2009). <4.1 The Theory of Cultural Capital of Bourdieu Bourdieu developed a theory of cultural capital popularly known as Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Lee 2009).

As Bourdieu (1986) argues, cultural capital has three types:

- Embodied cultural capital Linguistic skills, accent, and the forms of communication are to be learned as a result of socialization.
- Objectified cultural capital—cultural objects like books, literature, and education materials.
- Institutionalized cultural capital—academic qualifications as formal acknowledgement of cultural competence.

Punjabi has a strong tendency to serve as a form of embodied

cultural capital, which is acquired as a result of family and community life in Punjabi classrooms. English, on the contrary, can be a form of institutionalized cultural capital, which is linked to academic prestige and jobs.

Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy gives importance to the educational process in terms of tackling social inequality and empowering the marginalized communities. Freire (1970) holds that education ought to legitimize students in terms of cultural identity and language background instead of enforcing the dominating cultural standards. Using critical pedagogy in the Punjabi classrooms implies that incorporating Punjabi in the teaching processes may facilitate inclusive teaching and unify linguistic dominance.

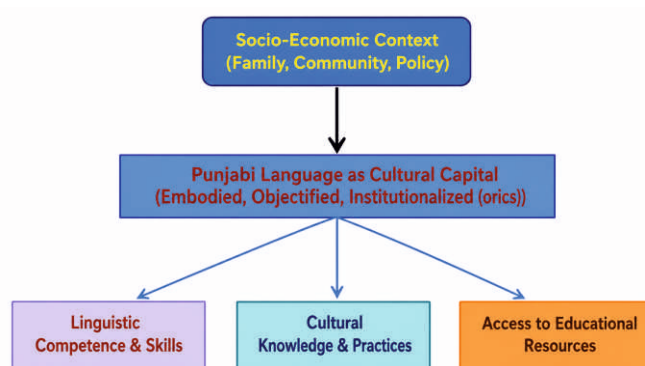
Conceptual Relationship

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the idea of language as cultural capital is that language is a source of cultural knowledge, values, and symbolic power that determine educational achievement. Punjabi classrooms have students with knowledge of Punjabi linguistic practices, cultural practices, and literary practices that contribute to their learning in the classroom.

Therefore, the cultural capital of the Punjabi language (independent variable) affects the teaching and learning experience and the performance and involvement of the learner in the Punjabi classrooms (dependent variable). Students who learn the Punjabi language and cultural aspects in the context of family and community are in a better position to be more active, comprehend what is presented in the classroom, and excel academically.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual frameworks assume that the cultural capital that the Punjabi language harbors will have an impact on the academic achievement and student participation. With this linguistic capital, which in many cases is influenced by the family and community setting, students enjoy a greater chance to excel in their studies, particularly in the classroom where their cultural knowledge is acknowledged and appreciated. The interaction between the language practices students come to the classroom with (Punjabi as embodied cultural capital) and the institutionalized requirements of academic success (primarily focused on English) in this model establishes a dynamic that interacts to influence educational outcomes.



Model:-1

Significance of the Study

- Role of Language in Education -How it works -Provides insight into the way language (Punjabi) serves as the cultural capital to determine the participation and success of students in a classroom.
- Contribution to Language Education Research describes the influence of cultural and linguistic resources on the process of teaching-learning.
- Improving Teaching Practices—This will help the teachers to use the inclusive approach by appreciating the linguistic background of students.
- Enhancing Cultural Identity—has been used to help maintain Punjabi cultural heritage among the students.
- Educational Policy and Curriculum Guidance Education policy and curriculum instructions assist policymakers in implementing programs that encourage the learning of the Punjabi language and cultural awareness.

Implications

- Educational Implications—When the cultural capital of Punjabi is realized, classroom involvement, academic success, and student involvement may be enhanced.
- Policy Implications- Educate language policy through the focus on inclusion of regional languages as quality educational tools.
- Socio-Cultural Implications—Enforces the culture and encourages social equality by legitimizing regional languages in schools.
- Teacher training implication—Reveals that multilingual pedagogy and culturally responsive teacher practice are areas that need professional development programs.

Discussion

Punjabi, Hindi, and English are simultaneously used in schools, which leads to multiplex hierarchies in language. English tends to take the first place because it correlates with economic mobility and worldwide communication. These ranks affect the way students perceive the value of languages and their involvement in the classroom activities. More English-fluent students have a chance to get more recognition and academic opportunities. The considerations of Punjabi as cultural capital can be used to solve these disparities by authorizing the linguistic identity of students and encouraging inclusion in classroom settings.

Limitations

- The research is purely theoretical and lacks empirical evidence of classrooms.
- Only concentrated on Punjabi, and therefore, generalizability to other local languages.
- Failures to go into detail of how gender, caste, and rural-urban differences come into play in language access.

Recommendations

- Introduce Punjabi and other local languages in curriculum design and the assessment practices.
- Train teachers in multilingual and multicultural responsive pedagogy.
- Promote the community and family engagement to

enhance the linguistic and cultural capital of the students.

- Fund scholarships for intervention and policy application to decrease linguistic inequality in the classroom.

Future Research Directions

This theoretical framework can be developed in future studies with the inclusion of empirical and comparative studies that will confirm the place of language as cultural capital in Punjabi classrooms. The following directions are particularly important:

- **Empirical Classroom-Based Studies**
Future research ought to carry out a field study in Punjabi classrooms to explore the influence of using Punjabi on student engagement, understanding, and test scores.
- **Comparative Regional Language Studies**
The comparative studies with other regional languages of India (e.g. Tamil, Bengali, Marathi) may offer a more generalized information on how linguistic capital functions in other socio-cultural environments.
- **Intersectional Analysis**
Future studies need to examine the interaction of gender, caste, rural-urban, and class with linguistic capital to shape access and performance in education.
- **Language Policy and Implementation Studies**
The implementation of the language policies at the national and state level in schools and the way in which they either support or dismantle the linguistic hierarchy is to be critically analyzed.
- **Teacher Beliefs and Classroom Practices**
Exploring the attitudes of teachers towards Punjabi and multilingual education may assist in learning how pedagogical practices may either uphold or marginalize the linguistic identities of students.
- **Digital and Technological Interventions**
Future studies may focus on how technology, AI tools, and online platforms can be used to facilitate the learning of the Punjabi language and its development as cultural capital.
- **Longitudinal Studies on Language and Mobility**
Long-term studies tracking students over time can reveal how linguistic capital influences career opportunities, social mobility, and identity formation

Conclusion

Language is not merely a tool of communication but a powerful form of cultural capital that shapes educational experiences, identity formation, and social mobility. In multilingual contexts such as Punjab, the coexistence of Punjabi, Hindi, and English creates hierarchical linguistic structures that significantly influence students' academic opportunities and participation. This paper, grounded in Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and the principles of critical pedagogy, highlights how the marginalization of Punjabi in formal education contributes to the reproduction

of educational inequalities. While English continues to dominate as institutionalized cultural capital, Punjabi remains a vital embodied cultural resource rooted in students' lived experiences. Recognizing Punjabi as legitimate cultural capital within classrooms can foster inclusive pedagogy, enhance student engagement, and strengthen cultural identity. Such recognition requires a shift in educational practices, teacher training, and language policies to ensure that regional languages are not subordinated but integrated meaningfully into the learning process. Ultimately, building equitable and culturally responsive education systems in India demands a re-evaluation of linguistic hierarchies and a commitment to valuing the intellectual and cultural richness of regional languages like Punjabi.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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