

ENGLISH AS LINGUISTIC CAPITAL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND POWER RELATIONS IN PAKISTAN AND CHINA

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Abstract

This study examines English as a form of linguistic capital that perpetuates social inequality and class stratification in Pakistan and China. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory—specifically Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) framework of linguistic and cultural capital—the research investigates how English proficiency functions as a gateway to educational attainment, professional advancement, and upward social mobility. The study demonstrates that English operates not merely as an international medium of communication but as a socially valorised resource that reproduces existing power asymmetries in both national contexts. In Pakistan, English is intimately associated with elite private schooling and upper-class identity, creating a sharp bifurcation between English-medium and Urdu-medium educational pathways, which in turn entrenches socioeconomic stratification. In China, the dynamics differ in form but remain inequitable in effect: an urban–rural divide means that students in metropolitan areas enjoy substantially richer access to high-quality English instruction than their rural counterparts. Consequently, English proficiency operates as a decisive determinant of educational and occupational opportunity in both countries. The study further argues that English functions as a mechanism for reproducing social stratification by privileging the linguistically endowed in alignment with global neoliberal economic imperatives. It emphasises the critical role of language policy and educational governance in either ameliorating or intensifying these disparities. Despite their markedly different sociopolitical structures, Pakistan and China both exhibit a pattern in which English remains a potent symbol of power and socioeconomic status. The findings underscore the urgent need for more inclusive, equity-oriented language policies that ensure equitable access to English language education as a prerequisite for inclusive development and structural equality.

Keywords: *Pakistan, China, English language, linguistic capital, social inequality, postcolonial linguistics, globalization, language and power, socioeconomic stratification*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, language is far more than a neutral instrument of communication. For millions of people in the Global South, English has become a form of linguistic capital—a socially valued resource that conditions access to education, employment, and social recognition (Bourdieu, 1991; Park & Wee, 2013). Khan, Bilal, and Nawaz (2023) have demonstrated that choosing English as an academic and professional pathway can yield significant financial advantages, social prestige, and career mobility. In countries such as Pakistan and China, English occupies a position that extends well beyond functional communication: it is simultaneously a marker of power, modernity, and internationalism,

functioning as a symbolic currency that can empower or marginalise individuals depending on their degree of proficiency (Yong & Campbell, 1995).

This asymmetric distribution of linguistic capital produces and reproduces social stratification. Those who possess English proficiency—typically the wealthy, the urban, and those with access to internationally oriented institutions—are positioned advantageously within educational hierarchies, labour markets, and professional networks. Conversely, individuals who lack access to quality English education are systematically disadvantaged in contexts where English functions as an institutional gatekeeper (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). In both Pakistan and China, therefore, English operates as a form of symbolic capital that extends beyond phonology and syntax to encompass identity, social class, and cultural legitimacy.

This comparative study investigates the mechanisms through which English functions as linguistic capital in Pakistan and China, with particular attention to the educational, occupational, and social inequalities that this function generates. The study is guided by Bourdieu's (1991) theoretical framework, which conceptualises language as a socially constructed resource whose value is determined by the field in which it is deployed. By juxtaposing two countries with contrasting sociopolitical histories and language planning trajectories, the research illuminates both the universality of English as a global status marker and the specificity of its effects within distinct national contexts.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on linguistic capital, English in Pakistan, and English in China. Section 3 outlines the methodological framework. Sections 4 and 5 present and discuss the findings, and Section 6 offers conclusions alongside policy recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Linguistic Capital: Theoretical Foundations

The concept of linguistic capital is derived from Pierre Bourdieu's broader theory of cultural capital, which holds that non-economic resources—including knowledge, skills, and credentials—can be accumulated and converted into social advantages (Bourdieu, 1991). Linguistic capital, specifically, refers to the capacity to deploy language in socially valued ways such that speakers gain access to economic goods, educational opportunities, and symbolic recognition (Park & Wee, 2013). Within this framework, dominant languages—and in the contemporary global order, English in particular—function as instruments of both empowerment and exclusion, depending on one's position within the social field.

Bourdieu (1991) argues that language carries symbolic value: speakers of the 'legitimate' language are accorded cultural and economic advantages that accrue to them as a form of symbolic capital. Critically, linguistic capital is not distributed equally but is structured by the same forces—class, geography, institutional access—that organise other forms of social inequality. In diverse multilingual contexts such as Pakistan and China, speakers of dominant languages like English thus retain structural advantages that are simultaneously real and naturalised as meritocratic (Blommaert, 2010). Research across multiple national contexts confirms that linguistic capital is transposable across fields: proficiency in a dominant language enhances performance in educational markets and improves labour market outcomes, thereby perpetuating intergenerational inequalities (Gazzola et al., 2019).

English has attained the status of a global symbolic resource and functions as the primary lingua franca of international diplomacy, scientific publication, digital communication, and multinational commerce (Salem, 2025). Research consistently indicates that English proficiency enhances employment prospects and socioeconomic mobility, particularly in developing economies (Chakraborty et al., 2025; Islam & Ramalingam, 2024). In this sense, English operates simultaneously as monetary capital—generating income

differentials—and as cultural capital, shaping individual and collective identities in relation to global modernity.

2.2 English in Pakistan: Colonial Legacy and Class Division

The presence of English in Pakistan is inseparable from its colonial history. Introduced and institutionalised during British colonial rule, English was constructed as a superior, prestigious language and retained its privileged position after independence in 1947 (Abbas, 1993). It continues to dominate official discourse, the judiciary, higher education, and elite professional contexts, creating a persistent linguistic hierarchy that maps closely onto class divisions.

A central feature of Pakistani sociolinguistics is the bifurcated structure of its educational system. English-medium private schools serve the economic elite, employing English as both the medium of instruction and a marker of institutional identity, while government-funded public schools operate primarily in Urdu or regional languages (Saleem et al., 2023; Vandrick, 2014). This structural divide produces starkly unequal language outcomes: children educated in English-medium institutions emerge with far greater proficiency and confidence, and consequently enjoy superior access to higher education and professional opportunities. As Fatima (2025) has argued, the Pakistani educational system effectively creates 'two systems, two futures'—one for the English-educated elite and one for the Urdu-medium majority.

Access to English education is further stratified by geography and socioeconomic background. Urban centres such as Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad offer considerably richer English-language environments—private tuition, internationally affiliated schools, and English-dominant social networks—than rural and semi-urban regions, where such resources are scarce or unaffordable (Giddens, 1982). Manan (2024) has described this dynamic through the metaphor of English as 'a credit card': powerful for those who possess it, but systematically unavailable to large segments of the population. The effect is a self-reinforcing cycle in which linguistic disadvantage compounds economic disadvantage across generations. Ali (2026) has further observed that dominant language ideologies in Pakistani education continue to perpetuate a kind of neo-colonial subjectivity, rendering English not merely a skill but a marker of civilisational hierarchy.

2.3 English in China: Policy-Driven Globalisation and Persistent Inequality

In China, the relationship between English and social stratification follows a somewhat different trajectory, shaped by the state's active role in language planning. Rather than inheriting an English-medium institutional infrastructure from colonialism, China has strategically promoted English acquisition as part of its modernisation and internationalisation agenda (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). The rapid expansion of English Medium Instruction (EMI) in Chinese universities since the late 1990s exemplifies this policy orientation, with English positioned as a vehicle for global academic participation and economic competitiveness (Zheng & Choi, 2024; Fang et al., 2026).

However, policy intentions do not uniformly translate into equitable outcomes. A persistent urban–rural divide means that English instruction in metropolitan areas is substantially better resourced, technologically enhanced, and professionally staffed than in rural provinces, where qualified English teachers remain in chronic short supply (Yan et al., 2024). Urban students consequently achieve markedly higher English proficiency scores, enabling them to secure places at elite universities and to access international employment opportunities—particularly in multinational corporations, export industries, and technology sectors—that are effectively closed to their rural peers. As Rahman and Hu (2025) have documented, EMI policy in China, while rhetorically inclusive, frequently instantiates

neoliberal ideologies that privilege the already-advantaged, reproducing rather than redressing social inequality.

Tianyi and Hussain (2024) further note that language planning in both Pakistan and China has been profoundly shaped by external forces—in China's case, the dual pressures of economic globalisation and post-pandemic internationalisation—which continue to position English as an indispensable competency while leaving the terms of access structurally inequitable.

2.4 Comparative Perspectives and Research Gaps

The comparative sociolinguistic literature on Pakistan and China remains notably thin. Studies tend to focus on one national context or the other, with few systematic attempts to examine how English functions as linguistic capital across these two distinct sociopolitical environments (Haidar & Fang, 2019; Saleem et al., 2023). The present study addresses this gap by adopting an explicitly comparative framework that foregrounds both the shared structural logic of English as a global status marker and the nationally specific configurations through which this logic operates.

Emerging themes in the literature—including multilingualism, hybrid identity formation, and the contested politics of linguistic imperialism—suggest that the relationship between English and social inequality is neither static nor monolithic (Blommaert, 2010). For some scholars, English represents a liberating resource that enables access to global knowledge and opportunity; for others, it is an instrument of cultural and epistemic suppression that privileges Anglophone epistemologies at the expense of local languages and identities. The present study situates itself at this intersection, arguing that both perspectives capture partial truths and that the task of sociolinguistic scholarship is to illuminate the specific conditions under which each dynamic predominates.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative survey data from Pakistan with qualitative secondary analysis of academic and policy literature from China. The rationale for this design lies in the complementary epistemological affordances of each approach: quantitative data provide systematic, statistically interpretable evidence of attitudinal and experiential patterns among Pakistani participants, while qualitative thematic analysis of Chinese secondary sources permits deeper engagement with the institutional and discursive mechanisms through which English functions as linguistic capital in that context.

The underlying research paradigm is pragmatism, which holds that knowledge is constructed through multiple methodological approaches rather than through adherence to a single epistemological tradition (Gillespie et al., 2024; Revez & Borges, 2018). Pragmatism is particularly well suited to comparative sociolinguistic research in which the two national contexts under investigation differ not only in their linguistic landscapes but also in their institutional structures, thereby necessitating methodologically flexible and context-sensitive data collection and analysis strategies.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Pakistan: Survey Instrument

For the Pakistani context, a structured self-completion questionnaire was administered to university and college students as well as early-career professionals—a population selected for its direct and ongoing engagement with English as an academic and professional medium. Participants were drawn from urban and semi-urban regions, thereby capturing variation in English-language exposure and access. The questionnaire employed multiple-choice and Likert-scale items assessing English proficiency self-perception, attitudes towards English in educational and professional settings, and perceived correlations between English proficiency

and social status, career prospects, and institutional access. Random sampling procedures were employed to minimise selection bias and to ensure representational adequacy within the target population.

3.2.2 China: Secondary Data Sources

For the Chinese context, data were drawn from peer-reviewed academic journal articles, government education policy documents, and international academic databases. Given the absence of primary fieldwork access, purposive sampling of published secondary sources was employed, prioritising high-quality, methodologically rigorous studies on EMI, language policy, and socioeconomic inequality in Chinese educational contexts. This approach enables engagement with large-scale, longitudinal research that would be impossible to replicate within the scope of a single comparative study.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Pakistani questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentage calculations, and comparative tabulations. These analyses were designed to identify systematic patterns in English language attitudes, access, and proficiency, and to examine associations between English proficiency and socioeconomic outcomes.

Qualitative thematic analysis was applied to the Chinese secondary data. Following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes were inductively and deductively identified across the corpus of secondary sources, with attention to patterns concerning educational inequality, EMI implementation, language ideology, and policy outcomes. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through triangulation, with convergent evidence interpreted as strengthening the overall analytical claims and divergent evidence subjected to further interpretive scrutiny.

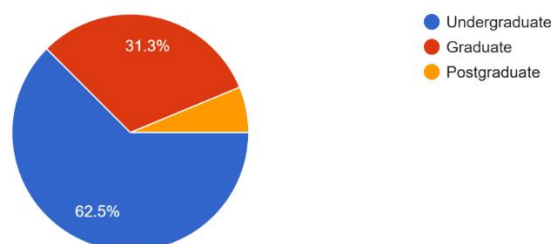
3.4 Ethical Considerations

All Pakistani participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw without penalty; no personally identifiable information was collected. Data were anonymised prior to analysis. For the Chinese secondary data component, only freely available, publicly cited academic sources were consulted, and all cited materials are fully attributed in accordance with academic ethical standards.

4. FINDINGS

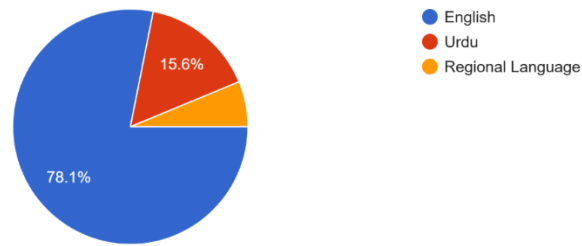
The data is collected through a mixed method research. Pakistani data was collected through a questionnaire, and Chinese data was collected through online sources and secondary data from various sources like Google Scholar, Research Rabbit, articles, blogs, and sundry other websites.

What's your current level of study?
32 responses



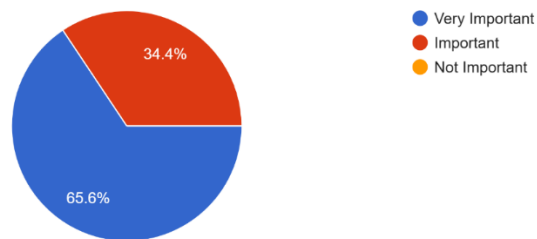
Which Medium of instruction was used in your previous education?

32 responses



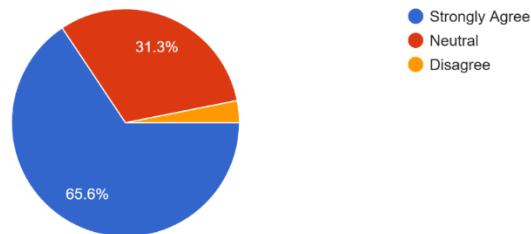
How important is the English language for academic and professional success in Pakistan?

32 responses



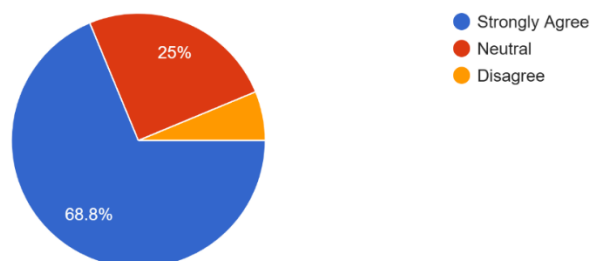
What do you think? In Pakistan, English proficiency is associated with higher social status and power.

32 responses



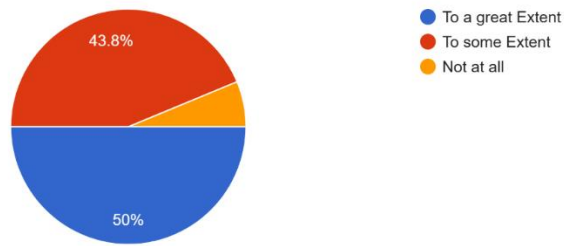
In Pakistan, Students from English-medium backgrounds have more opportunities than students from Urdu or regional-medium backgrounds.

32 responses



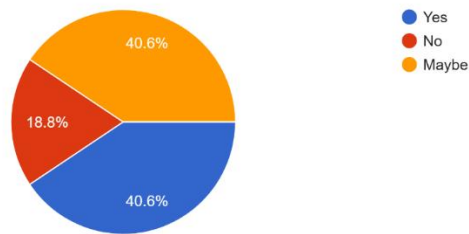
To what extent does English create educational inequality in Pakistan?

32 responses



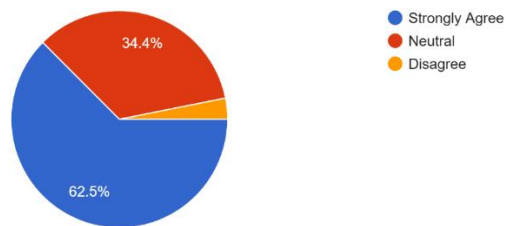
Have you personally experienced disadvantage due to limited English proficiency?

32 responses

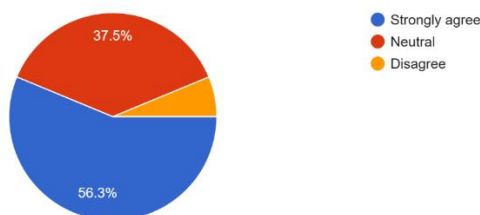


What do you think? The dominance of English in Pakistan is a result of colonial history.

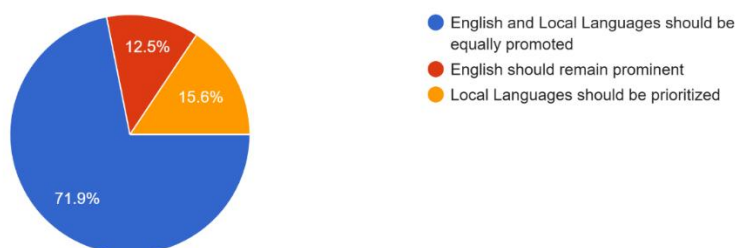
32 responses



Does the preference for English weaken local languages and cultural identity in Pakistan?
32 responses



Which approach should Pakistan adopt regarding language policy?
32 responses



4.1 English as Social Marker in Pakistan

Survey responses from Pakistani participants reveal a near-unanimous perception that English proficiency is closely associated with educational success, professional advancement, and social prestige. A substantial majority of respondents indicated that students from English-medium schools are perceived as more intelligent, more qualified, and more deserving of elite institutional positions than their Urdu-medium counterparts—a perception that reflects and reinforces the structural inequality embedded in Pakistan's bifurcated educational system.

Respondents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and semi-urban areas reported significantly greater difficulty accessing quality English instruction, private tutoring, and English-dominant social environments. Many noted that English proficiency was a decisive factor in university admission processes and in securing employment in competitive sectors. These findings are consistent with Manan's (2024) characterisation of English as a 'credit card' in Pakistan: a resource whose possessors enjoy disproportionate access to social goods, and whose absence functionally excludes individuals from elite spaces.

The data further indicate that English-medium schooling is widely perceived not merely as a pedagogical choice but as a class signal: families invest in English-medium education not only for its linguistic outcomes but for the social positioning that such education confers. This finding aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) analysis of educational credentials as forms of cultural capital that carry symbolic value beyond their technical content.

4.2 English as Institutional Capital in China

Analysis of secondary sources on the Chinese context reveals a pattern in which English proficiency functions primarily as a form of institutional and economic capital, particularly within the sphere of higher education and international commerce. The rapid proliferation of EMI programmes in Chinese universities has created strong structural incentives for English acquisition, especially among urban, middle-class students aspiring to international academic credentials or employment in multinational firms (Zheng & Choi, 2024).

However, the literature consistently documents that these opportunities are unevenly distributed. Rural students, who lack access to well-resourced English programmes and qualified teachers, are systematically disadvantaged in national English proficiency

examinations such as the College English Test (CET). This disadvantage, in turn, restricts their access to EMI programmes and to the premium employment opportunities that such programmes facilitate (Yan et al., 2024). Fang et al. (2026) have further documented the ideological tensions within EMI classrooms, where instructors navigate competing pressures between knowledge transmission and policy compliance—tensions that often disadvantage non-native English speakers.

4.3 Comparative Observations

Across both national contexts, the findings converge on a central claim: English proficiency operates as a mechanism of social selection, granting advantages to those who possess it and imposing costs on those who do not. Yet the specific form that this mechanism takes differs meaningfully between the two countries. In Pakistan, English is deeply embedded in the class structure as a colonial inheritance, functioning as an almost direct proxy for social class. In China, English is more explicitly tied to the state's modernisation agenda, and its distributional effects are mediated by state policy to a greater degree—though this mediation does not eliminate inequality so much as restructure it along urban–rural rather than strictly class-based lines.

These findings corroborate Bourdieu's (1991) thesis that linguistic capital functions analogously to economic capital: it is accumulated over time, is unevenly distributed across the social field, and yields compounding returns to those who already possess it. They also confirm Haidar and Fang's (2019) comparative observation that, despite their different colonial and political histories, Pakistan and China share a common structural logic in which English proficiency reproduces social advantage.

5. DISCUSSION

The present findings make several important theoretical and empirical contributions to the sociolinguistics of English as linguistic capital. First, they demonstrate that Bourdieu's framework retains considerable explanatory purchase across very different national contexts. In both Pakistan and China, the conversion of linguistic capital into social, educational, and economic advantage follows a logic that Bourdieu (1991) would recognise: those who possess the legitimate language are accorded symbolic power, while those who lack it are subjected to what Bourdieu terms 'symbolic violence'—the naturalisation of their exclusion as the inevitable result of individual deficit rather than structural inequality.

Second, the comparison illuminates the role of national-level institutions in mediating the effects of global English. In Pakistan, weak state capacity and a historically fragmented educational system have allowed market forces to drive the valorisation of English, producing stark inequalities that correlate closely with class and geography. In China, a stronger and more centralised state apparatus has channelled the valorisation of English through policy mechanisms such as EMI, thereby shaping but not eliminating the inequitable distribution of linguistic capital. Rahman and Hu (2025) have described this dynamic as a tension between neoliberal ideologies and multilingual classroom realities—a tension that is acutely visible in both countries, albeit differently configured.

Third, the study highlights the temporal dimension of linguistic inequality. English proficiency is not acquired instantaneously but requires sustained investment of time, money, and social networks over many years—resources that are differentially available across social classes and geographies. This means that linguistic inequality tends to be self-reproducing: children born into households with greater access to English-medium instruction and English-speaking social networks begin accruing linguistic capital from an early age, compounding their advantages over time. This intergenerational dynamic is poorly captured by cross-sectional survey data and represents a priority area for future longitudinal research.

Practically, the findings suggest that neither market-driven diversification (as in Pakistan) nor state-directed standardisation (as in China) is sufficient to ensure equitable access to English as a social resource. Effective reform will require targeted interventions that address both the supply side—teacher quality, curriculum development, and resource allocation in underserved regions—and the demand side—the ideological valorisation of English at the expense of local languages and multilingual competencies. Asif et al. (2019) have argued that economic integration initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are reshaping language landscapes in both countries, creating new incentives for Chinese language learning in Pakistan while also intensifying demand for English in international business contexts. These developments add further complexity to the sociolinguistic picture and underscore the need for adaptive, context-sensitive language policies.

6. CONCLUSION

This comparative study has examined the role of English as linguistic capital in Pakistan and China, drawing on survey data from Pakistani participants and secondary analysis of the Chinese academic and policy literature. The findings demonstrate that, in both countries, English proficiency functions as a powerful mechanism of social selection, conditioning access to elite educational institutions, high-status occupations, and international networks of opportunity. While the specific form that this mechanism takes differs between the two national contexts—reflecting their distinct colonial histories, educational systems, and state capacities—the underlying structural logic is shared: English reproduces social advantage for those who possess it and imposes systematic disadvantage on those who do not.

The study makes several contributions to the existing literature. Theoretically, it extends Bourdieu's (1991) framework of linguistic capital to a cross-national comparative setting, demonstrating its applicability across culturally and institutionally diverse contexts. Empirically, it provides fresh evidence of the specific mechanisms through which English-based inequality operates in Pakistan and China, including the bifurcated school system in Pakistan and the urban–rural divide in China. Methodologically, it demonstrates the viability of a mixed-method comparative design for sociolinguistic inquiry.

6.1 Policy Recommendations

Several policy implications follow from these findings. In Pakistan, priority should be accorded to improving English language instruction within the public school system—through enhanced pre-service and in-service teacher training, curriculum reform, and targeted resource allocation to underserved regions—so that access to quality English education is not contingent on family income or residential geography. In China, policies should continue to address the urban–rural divide in English instruction, ensuring that EMI expansion does not further concentrate educational advantages in metropolitan centres at the expense of rural communities.

In both countries, policymakers should resist the framing of English as an unqualified good that automatically generates social mobility, and instead attend to the ideological and material conditions under which English proficiency is valorised. Multilingual education models, which position English as one resource among many rather than as the sole legitimate language, offer a promising alternative to both market-driven fragmentation and top-down standardisation. By making linguistic capital more equitably accessible, such approaches can contribute to broader goals of inclusive development and structural equality.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The Pakistani data rely on self-reported questionnaire responses, which are subject to social desirability bias and may not fully capture the complex lived experiences of English-language learners and

users. The Chinese data are drawn from secondary sources rather than primary fieldwork, which limits the depth and specificity of the analysis. The use of different data collection methods for the two national contexts also introduces asymmetries that complicate direct comparison. Furthermore, the analysis does not fully account for within-country variation across regions, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic strata.

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal primary data collection in both countries, with particular attention to intergenerational mobility and the long-term career outcomes of individuals with varying levels of English proficiency. Ethnographic and discourse-analytic approaches would complement the survey and secondary-source methods employed here, providing richer insight into the subjective dimensions of linguistic capital—how individuals experience, negotiate, and contest the valorisation of English in their everyday lives.

In conclusion, English as linguistic capital represents both a resource and a constraint: a vehicle for individual advancement and collective integration into global networks, but also a mechanism for reproducing and legitimising social inequalities. A more equitable and inclusive approach to English language education—one that recognises the value of multilingualism and attends to the structural conditions that shape language access—is not merely desirable but essential for the realisation of social justice in Pakistan, China, and the broader global context.

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