

## Exploring the Influence of Cultural Capital Theory on English Language Education

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### Abstract

Cultural capital theory (CCT) postulates that educational systems, particularly in capitalist societies, maintain social inequalities by favoring specific cultural resources and individuals engage in constant competition for valued resources. The study selects Bourdieu's seminal works and reviews the key concepts—cultural capital, habitus, and the field to explore the influence of CCT on English language education. Cultural capital, encompassing knowledge, skills, and experiences, exists in embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms. Habitus, a guiding framework, influences individuals' perceptions and actions shaped by primary and secondary socialization. The concept of the field represents the context where social positions and interactions unfold. Employing the content analysis research design, the study reviews the three concepts and the analyses highlight that students who possess greater cultural capital tend to experience increased comfort while learning the English language within the school environment. Conversely, students hailing from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face challenges in cultivating proficiency in the English language. The study argues that cultural capital and habitus play crucial roles and have influence English language learning, extending beyond institutional policies and textbooks. The influence of these factors emphasizes the need for a comprehensive understanding of cultural dimensions in education, with implications for informing educational policies and practices.

**Keywords:** Cultural capital, educational institutions, inequalities, language learning

### Introduction

Teaching and learning English encompass a multifaceted process that goes beyond mere language acquisition. It involves the systematic instruction of grammar, vocabulary, and language skills, alongside the development of effective communication and cultural understanding (Zarinfard et al., 2021). Teachers often employ diverse methodologies, including interactive activities and multimedia resources, to engage learners in a dynamic language-learning experience. Students, in turn, must actively participate, practice, and immerse

themselves in the language to achieve proficiency. Beyond linguistic competence, the process also emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, and cross-cultural awareness, reflecting the global significance of English (Wahyudi, 2018). Successful teaching and learning of English not only enables effective communication but also empowers individuals with the skills needed for academic, professional, and personal success in an interconnected world. Some theorists (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, for example) believe that the cultural capital held by language learners plays a crucial role in enhancing the skills needed for academic, professional, and personal successes.

The cultural capital theory (CCT) posits that individuals, groups, and societal strata engage themselves in constant competition for the resources deemed significant or valuable within that society's framework (Gao, 2011). This societal arrangement leads to a distribution of esteemed assets that vary greatly among individuals—some hold a surplus while others possess fewer holdings.

Pioneered by cultural capital theorists (such as, Bernstein, 1981; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Wexler, 2000), this perspective asserts that educational systems, particularly in capitalist societies, are inherently grounded in economic structures. These systems tend to legitimize rather than lessen the prevailing social inequalities. The academic attainment of students is intrinsically tied to the kind of knowledge propagated within educational institutions. It is contended that the knowledge of this school is not impartial; rather, it is intricately linked to the prevailing ideological dominance of the influential groups in society.

At the core of this theory lies the concept that educational institutions play a crucial role in sustaining a society marked by class distinctions—extending beyond the scope of institutional policies and the contents found within the textbooks based on the curriculum. This extension is achieved through the utilization of economic, cultural, and hegemonic capital wielded by the prevailing social class (Coleman, 1988; DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Lin, 1999; Spring, 1998). In stark contrast to being neutral entities, schools exhibit inherent social alignments. What may appear as impartial academic standards function as biased filters that favor students from dominant social strata. This favoritism stems from the acquisition of specific cultural resources, embedded through family backgrounds, which align most harmoniously with what schools tend to reward (Gao, 2011).

Within the school environment, the social class position and the culture tied to that class manifest as what is termed ‘cultural capital.’ This capital encapsulates a reservoir of knowledge and traits particular to that class. The theory’s core concepts—cultural capital, habitus, and field—operate in concert, shaping the interactions and dynamics within educational systems.

Despite the extensive exploration of CCT in the broader context, its specific adaptation within English language teaching and learning environments remains a research gap. Stepping outside the textbook, this study aims to address this gap, employing a content analysis technique to explore the potential transformations of CCT in the realm of English language education.

### **Methodology of the Study**

Employing a content analysis technique, this study aligns with established principles that prioritize the exploration of latent meaning, emphasize contextual attention, and allow for nuanced inferences within the given context (Krippendorff, 2018; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023; Neuendorf, 2002; Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015). The approach systematically scrutinized textual information through a structured process. Initially, relevant documents, primarily drawn from Bourdieu’s seminal works—particularly Bourdieu (1973, 1977, 1986) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990)—were selected. Subsequently, delimiting to the predefined categories (themes)—cultural capital, habitus, and field—were reviewed, primarily focusing on the selected works.

Following the principles of the thematic analysis technique, this paper seeks the identification of patterns and relationships of the predetermined themes specifically relevant to the cultural dimensions of English language teaching and learning. By implementing a content analysis technique, this study explores the influences of applying and manifesting the CCT within the realm of English language education offering a comprehensive understanding that could inform educational policies and practices.

### **Results and Discussion: Analyzing the Influence of CCT on Education**

This section provides an overview of three pre-determined key concepts: cultural capital, habitus, and field, explicating their influence on students’ learning, particularly within the context of English language education.

#### **Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital is defined differently by different scholars. Bourdieu (1986) demarcated it as knowledge, skills, education, experiences, and/or connections a person possesses through the

course of life that do or do not enable success. Gao considered it “competence in a society’s dominant cultural codes and practices through which social background inequalities are translated into differential educational certificates and which in turn lead to unequal social and economic returns” (2011, p. 8). Supporting these views, Murphy and Costa (2016) indicated that it is a contributing factor that plays the main role in both the reproduction of inequality and its legitimation through the misrecognition of social experiences and cultural inheritance as individual capacities.

Cultural capital can exist in three forms—embodied or incorporated, objectified or objectivized, and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). In the embodied state, cultural capital exists in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body. It is understood as comprising elements such as skills, habitus, styles of conversation, and posture. These are provided by the family and school. In the objectified state, the cultural capital exists in the form of cultural goods—pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, and machines, for instance. These cultural goods/products are associated with cultural capital, and an individual can acquire cultural capital by possessing them. In the institutionalized state, cultural capital exists in the form of a recognized certificate or license (i.e., educational qualifications that can be comparable and exchangeable). The institutionalized state of cultural capital makes it possible to transform from cultural to economic capital.

Many scholars (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Graaf et al., 2000) claim that students from high-status origin have better achievement than lower- and working-class students because students from higher class bring with them cultural preferences, attitudes, and behaviors to school, where their cultural capital is highly valued. As a result, because lower- and working-class students do not benefit from their background and do not derive the prerequisites from their families, they are left behind at the very beginning of their educational journey (Gao, 2011). Habitus, a significant element in Bourdieu’s framework, plays an important role in shaping the path of students’ educational journeys.

### ***Habitus***

Habitus is a concept that serves as a guiding framework for the approach to studying subjects, accentuating matters of significance, and furnishing us with a lens for contemplating relational aspects of these subjects. Within its sphere lies a collection of socially ingrained habits, skills, and inclinations. Habitus constitutes the lens through which individuals perceive and

engage with the social world, dictating their responses to it. It concerns our actions, emotions, thoughts, and modes of being. As Maton (2008) contends, “it captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others” (p. 52).

Habitus originates from both experiential and sociological puzzles (Maton, 2008). On the experiential front, individuals often view themselves as autonomous agents who make everyday decisions based on preconceptions regarding the anticipated manner, conduct, and attitudes of others. Sociologically, social practices exhibit regularities—Willis (1981) exemplifies this by illustrating that working-class youngsters tend to end up in working-class jobs, while middle-class readers often gravitate towards middle-brow literature.

In formal terms, Bourdieu defines habitus as an attribute of social agents, be they individuals, groups, or institutions. This attribute constitutes a “structured and structuring structure” (1994; as cited in Maton, 2008, p. 51). This structure is informed by past and present circumstances, such as family background and educational experiences. It is “structuring” in that it molds present and future practices, imbuing them with its organized nature. This “structured” nature encompasses an array of dispositions that engender perceptions, valuations, and conduct (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53).

Habitus is cultivated through primary and secondary socialization (Walther, 2014). Primary socialization occurs within the family during childhood and generally remains steadfast. The patterns of perception and action imparted during childhood constitute an education intertwined with the parents’ social standing within the societal framework. The secondary habitus, in turn, builds upon the primary one, influenced by school and university education, as well as other life experiences. The primary habitus exerts an ongoing influence on the development of the secondary one.

Habitus functions as the operative mechanism underlying the impact of cultural capital. Bourdieu conceptualized habitus as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (1971, p. 83). More precisely, an individual’s actions within a given social group are heavily shaped by a collective set of subjective perceptions held by all its members.

Habitus serves as the principle guiding the responses to unforeseen and ever-evolving situations (Bourdieu, 1977). It acts as the subconscious practice steering the learners toward the set goals employing the appropriate forms and quantities of capital within a social field (Rehbein, 2011, as cited in Walther, 2014). Bourdieu's concept of habitus is directly entangled with the idea of a field, which is introduced in the text that follows.

### ***Field***

The concept of 'field,' a fundamental construct within Bourdieu's theory, symbolizes a context wherein agents and their corresponding social positions are situated. Each agent's specific position within the field results from the interplay between distinct field-specific rules, the agent's habitus, and their accumulation of resources (Bourdieu, 1984). These social fields constitute domains where competition unfolds, encompassing interactions between individuals and groups. Essentially, a field serves as the background for the actions and interactions of stakeholders vested in specific domains.

A field, as articulated by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), embodies a network or arrangement of objective relationships between various positions. This dynamic viewpoint highlights that capital does not possess independent existence or functionality outside the context of a field. Bourdieu considers fields as arenas or structures that encompass the spheres of production, distribution, appropriation, exchange of goods, services, knowledge, and social standing. In these arenas, actors—both dominant and subordinate groups—compete for the accumulation, exchange, and monopolization of diverse forms of power resources or capitals (Dumais, 2002; Gao, 2011; Swartz, 2016; Thomson, 2008). In essence, the concept of 'field' captures a composite association between structural forces and actors' agency, serving as the stage upon which involved power dynamics, interactions, and resource allocation emerge.

### ***Role of Cultural Capital and Habitus in Learning***

Cultural capital and habitus wield significant influence within the field of learning, particularly within the educational sphere of schools. In the explication of Dumais (2002), to fully operationalize Bourdieu's theoretical framework in practical contexts, it is imperative not only to scrutinize 'cultural capital' but also to encompass 'habitus.' She contends that a comprehensive understanding necessitates the simultaneous consideration of the resources an individual possesses (capital) and their disposition towards employing these resources (habitus). This dual comprehension is paramount for effectively applying Bourdieu's model of practice

within the educational domain, aligning with his intentions. This exploration of cultural capital and habitus holds heightened significance when delving into the dynamics of learning within educational institutions. In the interplay among capital, habitus, and field, Bourdieu (1984) posited their interdependence in generating practice and social action. In sum, individuals' actions are an outcome of their habitus and capital interactions within a specific field.

Within the educational landscape, the school system itself constitutes a field, with academic pursuits and efforts to achieve favorable results representing types of practices within this field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Within the educational arena, cultural capital takes precedence as the most valued form of capital which certainly influences English language learning. Academic success is directly centered on the possession of cultural capital and the inclination to invest it within the academic sphere (Bourdieu, 1973). Some scholars (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Dimaggio & Useem, 1978) emphasize that among the dominant classes, teachers possess and highly esteem cultural capital, often rewarding students who exhibit it.

Graaf et al. (2000) further this notion by asserting that students gifted with more cultural capital, coupled with a positive approach to English language learning, experience heightened comfort within the school environment. This facilitates continuous communication with teachers and subsequently fosters higher academic achievement. On the flip side, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may encounter hurdles in developing expertise in English. This is primarily due to a lack of vital cultural knowledge, particularly in the areas of English language proficiency, encompassing vocabulary, grammar, and necessary skills, as well as the corresponding materials and technology for enhancing the English language knowledge and skills aimed at continuous integration into the school culture. This underlines the undeniable influence of a learner's cultural capital and habitus in shaping the dynamics of the English language learning process, surpassing the confines of school policies and textbooks.

## **Conclusion**

The theory of cultural capital claims that societal structures perpetuate inequalities, especially within educational systems. The study employs the theoretical concept of English language education, revealing how cultural capital, embodied in knowledge, skills, and experiences, significantly influences students' language learning developments. Moreover, habitus, as a guiding framework shaped by both experiential and sociological factors, plays a pivotal role in shaping students' responses and actions within the educational field.

The three key concepts—cultural capital, habitus, and field—provide valuable insights into English language education. Cultural capital, manifested in various forms, proves instrumental in shaping students' language learning achievements, while habitus serves as the lens through which individuals direct their educational journeys. The educational field itself, as a complex network of interactions, further amplifies the impact of cultural capital and habitus on language learning outcomes.

This study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of how CCT operates within the context of English language education. The interpretations emphasize the need for an approach that goes beyond the textbooks, recognizing the socio-cultural dimensions that influence students' success in language acquisition. By acknowledging and addressing the role of cultural capital and habitus, teachers and policymakers can make informed decisions to foster a more equitable and inclusive English language learning environment by recognizing the influence of cultural capital (the knowledge, skills, and experiences students bring with them) and habitus (the ingrained habits and dispositions shaped by their social environment). By addressing these factors, as suggested by (Karki, 2018; Rai et al., 2023), they can adapt teaching strategies, curriculum design, and resource allocation to support diverse learners, use supplementary materials, bridge gaps in access to opportunities, and create an environment where all students have the tools and support they need to succeed. This may include tailoring instruction to different learning needs, promoting cultural awareness, and ensuring that policies are responsive to students' varied backgrounds.

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