

Research Paper

## Manifestations of Epistemic Violence in Assumptions of Students in an Undergraduate Classroom in Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** Epistemic violence refers to the silencing and displacing of a system of knowledge deemed to be inferior by another system of knowledge self-perceived as superior. In postcolonial context, it refers to the dominance and imposition of Western ways of perceiving the world by displacing the non-Western ways of perceiving the world. Colonial discourse is so encompassing in the postcolonial countries that students come to the classroom with assumptions that carry baggage of epistemic violence. According to Freire, the manifestations of this global “theme” may take particular dimensions in particular societies. Critical interrogation of epistemic violence requires identification of the particular manifestations of epistemic violence in particular societies. Following the approach of critical discourse analysis, this paper attempts to explore how epistemic violence manifests itself in the student assumptions exposed in their classroom interactions in an undergraduate classroom in Bangladesh, a postcolonial country. The findings reveal that besides the Western form of epistemic violence, there are local varieties of epistemic violence in Bangladesh. The discourses contributing to epistemic violence have been so ingrained in society that they appear as symbolic capital exercising symbolic violence where education plays a big role. The manifestations of epistemic violence in the context of Bangladesh revealed in this study have implications for framing critical instruction for problematising epistemic violence in postcolonial countries like Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Epistemic violence, postcoloniality, education, symbolic violence, Bangladesh

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## Introduction

Studies on the postcolonial condition have identified acts of epistemic violence in previously colonised countries (Altbach 1995; Ashcroft et al., 1995; Canagarajah 1999; Thiong'o, 1986). Epistemic violence refers to the silencing and displacing of a system of knowledge deemed to be inferior by another system of knowledge self-perceived as superior. In the postcolonial context, it refers to the dominance and imposition of Western ways of perceiving the world by displacing non-Western ways of perceiving the world (Spivak 1988/1995, p. 24). It results from colonial discourse based on the assumption of universalism rooted in a Eurocentric view of the world (Achebe, 1995; Larson, 1995). Colonial discourse presents everything non-Western as the inferior Other, as they lack so-called universal standards (Alatas, 1977; Ashcroft et al., 1995; Fanon, 1967; Said, 1995). This results in destroying the “the pride of the native” (Alatas, 1977, p. 29), and injecting inferiority onto the colonised subject (Fanon, 1967). As a result, formerly colonised people adopt the Western ways of perceiving the world (Altbach, 1995, p. 245; Said, 1995, p. 25), which leads them to consider their own people inferior (Thiong'o, 1986).

Studies on epistemic violence in education in the postcolonial context mainly focus on curriculum and pedagogical prescriptions and explore how they contribute to epistemic violence (Vickers, 2019). For example, Canagarajah (1999) argued that educational philosophies and pedagogical practices in education in postcolonial countries can be “traced back” to the colonial discourse (p.12). Altbach (1995) and Alatas (2000) illustrated that in the name of reform for modernisation of education, educational theory, curriculum, and pedagogy implemented in most of the postcolonial countries are uncritically imported from the West. This keeps the opportunity for epistemic violence to continue (Nguyen et al., 2009). Colonial discourse is so encompassing in many postcolonial countries that, as Mukherjee (1986/1995) found, students come to the classroom with assumptions that carry the baggage of epistemic violence.

This baggage of epistemic violence, as Freire (1970, p. 103) maintains, constitutes a global theme which plays out differently in different societies. Therefore, critical interrogation of epistemic violence requires identification of its particular manifestations in particular societies (Freire, 1970). This paper attempts to explore how epistemic violence manifests itself in the student assumptions exposed in their classroom interactions in an undergraduate classroom in Bangladesh, a postcolonial country. The manifestations of epistemic violence in the context of Bangladesh revealed in this study have implications for framing critical instruction for problematising epistemic violence in postcolonial countries like Bangladesh.

## Context

Bangladesh is a formerly colonised country. As part of India until 1947, Bangladesh shares the history of India's colonial legacy. India had been a British colony for about 190 years from 1757 to 1947. British colonial rulers adopted an education policy in India that aimed at moulding the mindset of the people in the light of European enlightenment so that the people of this country would think and live like the English people, though in appearance they were Indians (see Altbach, 1995). Thus, colonial rulers exercised a form of epistemic violence, i.e., a process of establishing the dominance of Western ways of perceiving the world by displacing the indigenous ways of perceiving the world.

Colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent ended in 1947 leaving the subcontinent divided into two independent countries, India and Pakistan. Named as East Pakistan, Bangladesh was then one of the provinces of Pakistan. Policies were adopted to develop a national system of education to meet the demands of independent Pakistan. However, they turned out to be "mere words" as they lacked a clear-cut implementation strategy (Rahman et al., 2010). Meanwhile, Bangladesh had been experiencing socio-economic and political discrepancies as one of the provinces in Pakistan. In protest, Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971. After independence, several attempts were made to formulate an education policy suitable for independent Bangladesh. However, none of them could meet the demands of time once they came into force.

Finally, the 2010 Bangladesh education policy was formulated, approved and adopted for implementation. This policy aims to create citizens who will be intellectually independent and enlightened; who will be able to question all injustices in order to remove "socio-economic discrimination" (Ministry of Education, Bangladesh [MOE], 2011). However, attainment of this aim may be impeded, as suggested in literature on postcolonial condition (e.g. Mukherjee, 1986/1995), by students' assumptions that contribute to epistemic violence. Therefore, it is necessary to critically interrogate the student assumptions carrying epistemic violence in the classroom. The point of departure for critical interrogation is to identify the dimensions in which epistemic violence (i.e., "themes") manifests itself in the assumptions students bring to the classroom (Freire, 1970).

## Findings and Discussion

Following the approach of critical discourse analysis which deals with "the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimise social inequalities" (Mullet, 2018, p.1; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), this paper investigates epistemic violence in student assumptions during classroom interactions in an undergraduate English as a foreign language (EFL) course that the first author, taught at a university in an

urban area of Bangladesh. Throughout the paper, the first-person singular pronoun, I, refers to the first author who speaks from his vantage point as the instructor in his undergraduate class. The first-person plural pronoun, we, refers to both the first and second authors who speak from their vantage point as researchers, investigating the classroom vignettes presented. The English course which this study focuses on was meant to help students practise the English language and develop their language skills in the beginning semesters of their undergraduate studies. The course encourages students to speak and write on issues related to their everyday experiences so that they could comfortably take part in classroom discussions. For the study period, 24 students had enrolled in the course. Students in the course were from both urban and rural surroundings of the university. They were mostly from middle income homes who considered university education as a stepping stone to ensure a better life and upward mobility in society. As Bangladeshis, they were familiar with the local culture and the people of Bangladesh. Therefore, issues like the local attire and the role of illiterate people in Bangladesh were picked up for discussion in the classroom. Classroom interactions of the course were recorded and then transcribed as part of a larger study. Consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants, i.e., the students who enrolled in the course.

In this paper, we focus on two vignettes from the classroom interactions of two lessons of that course. These vignettes are chosen because they embody instances of acts of epistemic violence. For identifying the acts of epistemic violence, we drew on the postcolonial concept of epistemic violence where Western ways of perceiving the world drives the previously colonised people towards considering their own people “inferior” (Fanon, 1967; Spivak, 1988/1995; Thiong’o, 1986).

### Vignette one

*“Lungi is not the dress of the educated modern people”: The western, the local and the peasants*

The first vignette we discuss here is taken from the students’ exchanges on *lungi*, the local attire for men in Bangladesh. Students were discussing an event where a renowned Bangladeshi writer, poet, columnist, environmentalist and human rights activist was denied entry into the Dhaka Club for a party invitation because he had come dressed in *lungi*, the local attire for men in Bangladesh, which he usually wears as his signature outfit. Established in 1911, the Dhaka Club claims that as the oldest and the largest of elite clubs in Bangladesh, it is “an icon of elegance in its aristocracy, tradition and excellence” (As stated on the website: <http://www.dhakaclubltd.com/page/about-dhaka-club>).

In the midst of a hot discussion, the students stopped talking when the instructor, the first author, entered the classroom. With a view to letting them speak on the issue, the instructor inquired after the matter. So, the discussion on the issue resumed.

Raju, (*all original names have been changed*) one of the students, said, “*Lungi is our local dress. So, we should respect the dress.*” Lisa, who was sitting beside Raju in class, made a sly comment: “Then you go back to be a farmer.” Ramij who was sitting behind Raju stood up and said, “*You must be rational. Lungi is not the dress of the educated modern people. It is the dress of the rural farmers.*” With regard to the word “farmer”, the students meant the peasants. Shuja added, “*Dhaka Club is for the educated modern people. So you must wear standard dress there.*” Arnab from the back of the class supplemented, “*Yes, we must wear modern dress in formal situations.*” He pointed to his fellow students in the class, “*Look! Here we are all wearing modern dress.*” The boys were all in pants and shirts, and girls in salower and kamiz. I noticed, of course, the seeming contradiction between male and female dress, and the claim about modernity. At this stage of the discussion, in agreement with Raju, I said, “*However, we should not disrespect our local dress.*” Then Ramij retorted, “*Sir, will you allow us in the classroom in lungi?*”

The question the student asked was intriguing. They knew that the university had a dress code which specified that students must be decently dressed. And obviously, based on the university traditions, the *lungi* would not be considered as a decent outfit. However, the classroom dialogue evoked several questions. Why was the local attire not considered decent? How could Western attire (i.e., pants and shirts, for males) be considered as the standard for the people of Bangladesh? Why did the students link modernity with Western values? Why did they look down upon the farmers, i.e., the peasants, their own people? What did they mean when they said, “*You must be rational?*”

In the conversation, none of the students denied that *lungi* was their local attire. However, all the students except Raju placed it in opposition to decency, standards, and modernity. *Lungi* in the dialogue was represented as a symbol of the locals, which was further considered as indecent, non-standard, and pre-modern, and so inferior to the Western norms and values represented by the “*pants and shirts.*” Thus, students were speaking in terms of the binarism of the colonial discourse i.e., European–non-European; civilised–native; Western–local, etc. (Ashcroft et al., 1995) and considered the local as inferior. Fanon (1967) described this condition in the context of Africa where colonial discourse so forms the mindset of the colonised that they lose their cultural origin and embrace the culture of the coloniser country. This discourse represents the colonised people as villains and associates them with “wrongness”. It produces an inferiority complex in the mind of the colonised Subject, who then tries to appropriate and imitate the culture of the coloniser. Therefore, even speaking in favour of the local attire was deemed to be unrealistic and irrational in vignette one. Hence, the student emphasised, “*You must be rational.*” Thus, Western i.e., European values displaced their own values and became the standard of the educated people’s way of perceiving the world. The claim that *lungi* is “not the dress

of educated modern people” implies that educated modern people, i.e., the students tend to distance themselves from local practices and values (Thiong'o 1986). As a result, the students considered the peasants, who are their own people, as inferior.

### Vignette two

*“How will the illiterate people know who is good or bad?”: Dominant literacy practice and discrimination*

Like the peasants in vignette one, illiterate people were considered inferior when students in another lesson were discussing the illiterate people of Bangladesh. The discussion was triggered by an anecdote I narrated to the class. It was about one of my friends' views about the role of the illiterate people of Bangladesh. The anecdote went as follows:

*Once I was engaged in a casual discussion with my friend. We were talking about the development and the democratic practice in Bangladesh. The discussion turned to the role of the illiterate people of Bangladesh in this regard. My friend said that as illiterate people can't read and write, they do not have the ability to distinguish good and evil. As a result, they are unable to vote for the right person during national polls. Thus, they pose a problem to the development of Bangladesh.*

The sectors mainly contributing to the development of Bangladesh are agriculture, readymade garments, and remittance. These sectors are mainly run by the vast majority of the people who are deprived of literacy. In spite of all the economic contribution of the illiterate people of Bangladesh, my friend referred to the illiterate people of Bangladesh as barriers to the development of the country, because, according to him, as they did not have literacy, they were devoid of the capabilities of distinguishing good and evil.

The anecdote triggered an emotional and heated discussion where Rima protested, *“It's too much that he said. ... we cannot say that illiterate people are the main problem.”* In reply Saba said, *“[During period of election] how will the illiterate people know who [i.e., which candidate] is good or bad?”* In response, Rima retorted, *“One does not need to be literate --- to know if someone is good or bad. This conscience [is something all] human beings [possess] ---.”* Tisha, however, supported Saba, *“Sir, ... the responsibility goes on them – the responsibility to recognize good from bad. In this regard, they should have the judgement ... power.”* Hashi responded in the same line, *“Sir, they do not have any personality. They follow what others [other people] say or if they are bribed --- they are allured.”* As the teacher in this class, I (the first author) tried to

question Hashi's view, "*Not only the illiterate are allured to money.*" Some students (in a voice) spoke out to support my statement, "*Some literate people do it in greater rate.*"

Saba, Tisha and Hashi's comments reflect the humiliating status accorded to the illiterate people as expressed in the anecdote. In the context of the interactions, Saba's question "*How will the illiterate people know who is good or bad?*" indicates that illiterate people cannot distinguish good and evil because of the lack of literacy. Thus, she assumed that only literacy ensures the ability to distinguish good and evil. A similar assumption seemed to have driven Tisha's comment, "*In this regard, they should have the judgement ... power.*" The word "should" in Tisha's comment implies that the illiterate people are devoid of the capability to judge. Hashi clearly stated that "*they do not have personality*" so "*they follow what others [other people] say.*" Moreover, they are "*allured*" to "*bribes*", i.e., inducements paid by certain parties to vote a particular candidate. Thus, while Rima differed, Saba, Tisha and Hashi perceived people deprived of literacy as inferior beings. Though some of the literate people of Bangladesh often demonstrate the same limitations and flaws, as was disclosed in the comments of some other students, they were only highlighted for the illiterate people. Thus, it is the discourse associated with literacy (i.e., the assumption that only literacy ensures the ability to distinguish good and evil) that led the students to regard illiterate people as inferior.

We surmise here that literacy, as Foucault (1980) maintains, sets up a dividing line between the literate and the illiterate, i.e., between those who read and those who do not, disadvantaging the latter. Though "there are many ways of reading and many ways of learning to read", those who can read in the dominant literacy practice are considered to have common sense, rational, and morally righteous, while those who do not, lack common sense, are irrational, and morally bankrupt (Bloome et al., 2008, p. 39). The discourse associated with literacy tends to regard people deprived of literacy as inferior, disregarding the other qualities they possess and the contribution they make to the development of the country. Thus, illiterate people are discriminated against in the Bangladeshi society.

### **Varieties of Epistemic Violence in Bangladesh**

Although some oppositional voices like Raju in Vignette one and Rima in Vignette two were present, instances of epistemic violence were evident in the vignettes. Vignette one illustrates the privileging of shirts and pants symbolising the West as standard, modern, and formal. Hence, perspectives highlighting the local culture were dismissed, and it was considered right that people wearing *lungi* to not be allowed into certain venues. In Vignette two, the assumption that only literacy could ensure the ability to distinguish good and evil disregarded illiterate people's capabilities as human beings and their contributions, and people deprived of literacy are considered inferior in social life.



The students' reference to *shirts* and *pants*, in Vignette one, symbolically links the act of epistemic violence to the West. However, no link to the West is found in the instance of epistemic violence in Vignette two. Students instead referred to the acts of inducement during the national polls of Bangladesh. This implies that besides the dominance and imposition of Western ways of perceiving the world (Vignette one), there are local varieties of dominance and imposition of perspectives (Vignette two) that may cause epistemic violence in postcolonial countries like Bangladesh.

### **Epistemic Violence, Education, and Symbolic Violence**

In each of the instances discussed above, the actors of epistemic violence were educated people while the acted upon were illiterate. Vignette two depicts epistemic violence associated with the literacy/illiteracy divide based on the dominant literacy practice that presents illiterate people as lacking cognitive capabilities. Hence some of the students, i.e., the literate people considered the illiterate people as inferior. In Vignette one, influenced by the Western culture, students considered peasants as inferior. It is noteworthy here that the peasants in Bangladesh are mostly illiterate. Therefore, besides having links with the Western culture, the act of epistemic violence in Vignette one appears to have links with the literacy/illiteracy divide. Thus, a common thread between the two instances of epistemic violence (the Western as well as the local varieties) is literacy/illiteracy divide that germinates from formal education. This exposes education as the underlying player in the acts of epistemic violence. Though education is generally meant to be empowering and transformative, and to help remove violence and discrimination from society (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2000), this study suggests, in line with critical pedagogy literature, that education is never innocent; it is political and can be oppressive (Auerbach, 1995; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2004).

Education's role in the acts of epistemic violence illustrated in this study may have links with the colonial discourse, because as Canagarajah (1999, p. 12) put forward, education in modern world is "built on educational philosophies and pedagogical traditions which can be traced back to the colonial mission of spreading Enlightenment values for civilising purposes." Thus, the local varieties of epistemic violence seen in Vignette two can have links with Western colonial discourse through education. However, the literacy/illiteracy divide based on the dominant literacy practice can be observed in postcolonial countries like Bangladesh even before they were colonised by the West. Educated people enjoyed special privileges in society in pre-colonial Bangladesh (see Rahim, 1967). Today, this divide is even more prevalent all around the world, even in the West (Bloome et al., 2008).

As Ergin et al. (2018) contended, in many settings, education commands respect and discursive power as a "symbolic capital" that refers to the effects of any form of



capital while it is not perceived as such. According to Bourdieu (1994), symbolic capital emerges as a crucial source of power that looks down upon those who lack this capital. At the same line, this study reveals that because peasants and illiterate people are deprived of education, a symbolic capital, they are considered as inferior human beings. As a result, they are denied equal rights. Thus, education as a symbolic capital perpetuates “symbolic violence” as it “manages to impose meanings” that label those who lack this capital as inferior. These meanings are imposed as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its potency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 4).

### **Conclusion**

As this study reveals, besides epistemic violence associated with Western discourses, there are local varieties of epistemic violence in postcolonial countries like Bangladesh. This goes in line with Parvin and Moore (2019) as well as Vickers (2019) who argue that there is epistemic violence of “local origin and character” or “homegrown forms of epistemic violence.” In addition, this study demonstrates that such discourses have been so ingrained in society that they appear as “symbolic capital” exercising “symbolic violence” where education plays a big role (Bourdieu, 1994). Thus, epistemic violence appears in many forms, and they are interconnected. Therefore, the findings corroborate with Vickers (2019) that connecting epistemic violence only to the West is to underestimate its complexity. This approach ignores the local dimensions of epistemic violence, as Kincheloe et al. (2018) argued, “focusing on only one at the expense of others often elides the interconnections among them” (p. 421).

### **Theoretical Implications**

The manifestations of epistemic violence in student assumptions revealed in this study are an addition to the existing literature on epistemic violence in education that mainly examines the curriculum and pedagogical prescriptions (see Alatas, 2000; Altbach, 1995; Canagarajah, 1999; Vickers, 2019). In exploring the assumptions that students carry into the classroom, this study demonstrates that epistemic violence has Western as well as local varieties which are interconnected contributing to symbolic violence. By including student assumptions within the focus, which has so far been mainly on the curriculum and pedagogical practices, the critical examination of epistemic violence has become more comprehensive.

### **Practical implications**

The findings imply that any attempt to critically investigate epistemic violence needs to tap all the different forms of epistemic violence into instructional contents and

construct questions to problematise epistemic violence. The implications of this study may apply to countries that have postcolonial conditions like Bangladesh.

As the acts of epistemic violence revealed in this study are related to issues like education and local culture, curriculum in the context of Bangladesh needs to address these issues and critically examine how the local culture is degraded and how education contributes to empowerment and/or discrimination in society. As the vignettes were taken from an EFL classroom, the findings have specific implications for EFL classrooms in Bangladesh. English language development courses in Bangladesh may select issues and instructional materials related to local culture and education. Dan and Abd. Rahim (2023) suggested that integration of regional culture can work for students as a means to “not becoming obsessed and blindly imitating western culture.” Materials related to local culture, as Kubota (2004) suggested, must highlight “critical multicultural perspective”, because by viewing culture as “diverse, dynamic, and socially, politically and discursively constructed” (p. 38), critical multiculturalism “promotes tolerance, acceptance, and respect towards different cultures and culturally diverse people while supporting equality among them” (p. 30). On the other hand, materials related to education need to underscore formal education’s “dividing practice” between those who are privileged with education and those who are deprived of education, disadvantaging the latter (Bloome et al., 2008; Foucault, 1980).

The vignettes reveal that while there are assumptions contributing to epistemic violence, there are also oppositional voices in the classroom. These oppositional voices, as Freire (1970) argued, need to be promoted in the instruction for examining epistemic violence. Critical instruction engages students in dialogue which is an egalitarian process where all voices enjoy freedom and equality (Freire, 1970; Talukder et al., 2022). Dialogues in EFL classrooms can help students to use the language to critically examine the acts of epistemic violence (Freire, 1970; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pennycook, 1999; Shor, 1992; Talukder & Samuel, 2017). This could help students appropriate English to find oppositional views and voices, and could broaden their perspectives for thinking and communication (Canagarajah, 1999; Norton & Toohey, 2004).

The key feature of critical instructions in the classroom is intriguing questions that challenge the status quo (Chun, 2009; Ko, 2013). Drawing on Ko (2013) and Chun (2009) and considering the dimensions of epistemic violence revealed in this study, the following questions can be framed to engage students in dialogue to investigate epistemic violence.

- What is the assumption behind the opinions?
- Whose interests are served with this assumption?
- What else could anyone assume?
- Whose interests are excluded?

- Whose voices are silenced?
- Why are they silenced or excluded?

These questions may generate more specific questions in the context of the materials introduced and the opinions exchanged in the classroom. In pedagogical settings — or in instructional materials — these questions or others like them may be used instructionally to prompt students to engage critically which key assumptions underpin their discourses, and hence challenge and engage with the possibility of epistemic violence.

### Limitations and Future Directions for Research

The data from this study were drawn from the transcripts of two lessons in a Bangladesh undergraduate classroom. While the small sample size may be seen as a limitation, the two vignettes that were identified served the purpose of providing a close reading of the dynamics of instances of epistemic violence. The purpose of the analysis was not for generalisation of findings to a larger population but to provide an interpretive insight into illustrative instances of epistemic violence in the Bangladeshi context.

As a follow-up to the investigation of epistemic violence in classroom settings, future research may focus on how epistemic violence manifests itself for particular population groups delineated by social class, gender or locality in Bangladesh. Also, analysis of transcripts of classroom discourse could be triangulated with interviews to throw further light on how different interlocutors process and make sense of the episodes of epistemic violence. Such follow-up research would eventually lead to a more nuanced theorising of the phenomenon on epistemic violence in classroom settings.

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