

**Navigating Heritage Language Maintenance, Loss, and Identity Negotiation: A
Phenomenological Study of Rohingya Students**

by

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Declaration of AI

Some AI tools (Notebook LM, ChatGPT) have been used for summarizing some relevant papers as well as for understanding certain methodological concepts. Idea generation, writing, interpretation and analysis – everything was done by me, and all external sources have been cited properly.

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Abstract

This phenomenological study seeks to explore the lived experiences of heritage language loss, maintenance, and identity negotiation of Rohingya students amidst continuous exposure to English language.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using thematic analysis adapted for transcendental phenomenology. Five key themes emerged from the analysis: choosing when to hide and when to show; feeling distant from one's own language; the double-edged nature of the role of English; the creation of safe spaces for culture; and taking pride in identity.

The findings show that participants had identity concealment initially, and they experienced lexical attrition as well as communicative gaps with family members due to the dominance of English. However, gradually they started considering English as a symbolic capital and as a means of academic mobility, global advocacy and historical preservation. In addition, participants found other micro-enclaves in which linguistic resistance was established, such as dormitories and digital spaces. With time, participants experienced a transition – from insecurity and stigmatized belief regarding their identity to pride and empowerment reconceptualizing their heritage language as strength.

These insights offer implications for inclusive higher education practices, need for institutional support systems for language maintenance as well as for ensuring psychosocial well-being of displaced student populations.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Language is not only a means of communication; rather, it is deeply interconnected with power, inclusiveness and identity (Bourdieu, 1991). Particularly for displaced populations, this connection is visible as forced migration not only jeopardizes the geographical location, but also destroys the social and linguistic environment that upholds the identity of a particular community. Among different displaced communities around the world, the Rohingya community is considered as one of the most severely affected due to their statelessness, a condition of not being recognized as citizens or nationals by any country. Rohingya people have been suffering from decades of persecution and citizenship abandonment, which has been termed as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” by the United Nations (Uddin, 2019).

Beyond these challenges, displacement also has another dimension: displaced communities, such as the Rohingya, also go through linguistic challenges in their new environment as they resettle. Use of their heritage language, Rohingya, goes through several phases of shift, loss and maintenance depending on the different social and institutional support available to them (Fishman, 1964; Neloy, 2025; Alsahafi, 2019, 2020). Simultaneously, the predominance of English as a global language plays a significant role in reshaping young Rohingya people’s route to higher education, work opportunities and international mobility as it offers symbolic and practical capital (Klapwijk & van der Walt, 2016). For refugee learners, specifically, English language acquisition is not only related to language learning, rather it is heavily connected with questions of their survival, goals and self-esteem.

According to the theory of investment by Norton Peirce (1995), when learners invest in language learning, they do so with the aim of building a new version of themselves. The

relevance of investment while learning a language can be particularly evident for refugee learners, as displacement destroys their connection with their social resources resulting in the disruption of their identity and future. As a result, learning a second language becomes one of their few remaining ways to rebuild their identity and construct the future that they want to pursue for themselves (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). In this context, rather than viewing Rohingya refugee women's engagement in learning English as a practical necessity, it can be understood as an active investment in constructing their imagined identities.

An English-medium liberal arts university holds a unique position in this context. In recent years, along with enrolling students from different marginalized communities across different regions, this university is also providing opportunity to Rohingya students to study in an English-dominant learning environment. As the students from this university come from diverse nationalities, Rohingya students in this university are situated in an environment where English becomes the only means of communication and study. This creates a completely different linguistic environment where Rohingya students must negotiate two competing demands: one, that their heritage language has emotional and social value (Fishman, 1964), and two, that English holds institutional as well as symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1991). Balancing these two demands is not only related to their heritage language maintenance and associated risk of loss, rather it is also deeply linked to identity, social inclusion and their imagined futures (Norton Peirce, 1995, 2013).

Existing literature on Rohingya language and identity focuses on camp-based settings (Neloy, 2025) or intergenerational transmission of heritage language in family settings (Alsaifi, 2019; Zhang, 2009; Zhu et al., 2020). However, very limited studies emphasize how Rohingya students, particularly Rohingya female students, navigate multicultural, English-medium higher

educational institutions where the dominant language (English) not only shapes the academic environment, but also controls social inclusion and professional ambition (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton Peirce, 1995; Klapwijk & van der Walt, 2016). Thus, this study is a phenomenological exploration of how Rohingya female students at an English-medium liberal arts university navigate heritage language maintenance and loss, as well as how they experience identity negotiation in an English-dominant learning environment. Rather than measuring visible patterns, this study seeks to capture the essence of the lived experiences of participants.

1.2 Problem Statement

Previous research findings shed light on the multifaceted challenges related to language use and identity construction among displaced or minority communities. Several studies emphasized the fact that the decreasing pattern of daily usage weakens heritage languages, which is specifically true for refugee contexts where communication is heavily impacted by a different language other than their first language (Fishman, 1964; Neloy, 2025). Researchers also highlight that due to learners' constant negotiation between the practical benefits of learning the English language (i.e. empowerment) and the emotional attachment to their own language, identity tension can occur (Norton Peirce, 1995; Hammoud, 2025). Additionally, scholars also point out that language with weak institutional support is at risk of language loss (Al-khresheh, 2026). However, there is a lack of studies investigating the impact of English language acquisition on heritage-language maintenance and identity negotiation, particularly among refugee youth. Moreover, there appears to be a lack of studies focusing specifically on the perceptions and experiences of Rohingya women with exposure to English language learning. Existing research has primarily examined camp-based settings (Neloy, 2025) or diasporic family contexts (Alsahafi, 2019, 2020), while very limited attention has been given to Rohingya

students navigating transnational, English-medium higher education institutions. Therefore, the question of how English acquisition impacts both heritage language maintenance and identity negotiation remains unexplored in the target population.

Given that English opens the door to education, empowerment, and global mobility, while simultaneously creating a possible linguistic and cultural gap, it is crucial to investigate this phenomenon in depth. This thesis addresses this gap by investigating how Rohingya women at an English-medium liberal arts university located in Bangladesh describe the cognitive and communicative tensions of maintaining their heritage language while navigating an English-dominant academic environment, and how they negotiate their identity, social positioning, and imagined future as they invest in English proficiency.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of Rohingya female students who have experienced long-term exposure to an English-dominant academic environment at an English-medium liberal arts university in Bangladesh. Specifically, this study aims to:

- Explore how Rohingya female students describe the cognitive and communicative tensions of maintaining their heritage language while navigating an English-dominant academic environment.
- Investigate the ways these women negotiate their identity, social positioning, and imagined futures as they invest in English proficiency.

1.4 Research Questions

To fulfill these objectives, this study is guided by the following central research questions:

1. How do Rohingya women describe the cognitive and communicative tensions of maintaining their heritage language while navigating an English-dominant academic environment?
2. In what ways do these women negotiate their identity, social positioning and imagined futures as they invest in English proficiency?

1.5 Significance of the study

This research extends the existing theory of language, identity and power - Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic capital, Norton Peirce's (1995) theory of investment, and Fishman's (1964) domain analysis - into a setting which has not been previously investigated through these lenses: Rohingya women in an English-dominant and multinational higher educational institution. By conducting a primary qualitative study on this under-researched population, this study adds a new dimension to the literature of sociolinguistics and identity study. Utilizing a phenomenological design grounded in Moustakas's framework (1994), this study will provide insights to future researchers by demonstrating how *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994) and semi-structured interview process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) can successfully capture the emotional depth of language negotiation which cannot be captured by quantitative instruments such as Likert-scale surveys (Neloy, 2025; Klapwijk & van der Walt, 2016).

The findings of this study may also be helpful for educational institutions that have students from displaced communities by offering insights into how educators might restructure their curricula as well as how institutions might give support to ensure the environment is more

inclusive of Rohingya students. This study will also be helpful for the policy makers who work on refugee educational policy as it will provide them with a nuanced understanding of Rohingya students' perspectives of the impact of the English-dominant learning environment on their heritage language as well as their identities. Finally, rather than picturing the Rohingya women as passive receivers of a crisis, it shows them as active participants of their academic as well as social lives where their voices and lived experience are highlighted and they are able to navigate the multifaceted negotiation of language and identity.

2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This literature shows how displaced and migrated people negotiate their language, identity and institutional spaces, providing a theoretical and contextual base. Section 2.2 focuses on the notion of "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1991) to shed light on the experience of migrated and refugee people in elite as well as multilingual environments. Section 2.3 shifts the focus from motivation - a conventional concept of language learning – to Norton Peirce's (1995) theory of investment whereas section 2.4 shows the paradox of linguistic hegemony and resistance (Suarez, 2002). Section 2.5 discusses Fishman's (1964) domain analysis with particular focus on heritage language maintenance, and section 2.6 shows a comparative picture of camp setting and higher education setting. Section 2.7 talks about the emotionally exhausting aspect of identity negotiation. Finally, section 2.8 synthesizes the methodological approaches in existing literature, and section 2.9 denotes the existing research gap prevailing in current literature about Rohingya female refugee students in a higher educational context.

2.2. Bourdieu and the Economy of Linguistic Exchanges

The linguistic trajectory of displaced communities in elite environments, for example, in the context of higher education, is mainly operated by “symbolic capital” as termed by Bourdieu (1991). Bourdieu’s sociological framework argues that the linguistic market is never neutral; all language is controlled by social structures shaped by power and inequality. In that linguistic market, usually the language of the elite class has more value than other languages. In the context of globalization, English has gained substantial linguistic capital, often serving as a gateway to educational advancement, social mobility, and professional opportunities in many international settings. For displaced populations, it sometimes becomes a necessity and practical

requirement to learn English for securing sustenance in a new country. However, this process can often get interrupted by “symbolic violence” when speakers of marginalized languages, such as Rohingya, accept the gradual devaluation of their language. This internalized linguistic hierarchy can produce feelings of shame and alienation among speakers of marginalized languages, especially when those languages are restricted to peripheral social contexts while English is positioned as the principal medium for intellectual development, educational success, and social advancement. The relationship between language and symbolic value has been observed in multilingual and migrant settings, where dominant languages are often tied with educational success, economic mobility and institutional legitimacy (Suarez, 2002; Klapwijk & van der Walt, 2016). At the same time, several studies indicate that heritage language often stands as an important symbol of identity, belonging and cultural continuity for displaced and migrant populations (Alsahafi, 2020; Al-khresheh, 2026).

2.3. Beyond Motivation: The Theory of Investment

Most theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) emphasize the psychological aspect of “motivation”. However, Norton Peirce (1995) argues that this perspective is not strong enough to describe the experience of marginalized or migrant students, rather the concept of “investment” should be considered. Whereas motivation is often treated as an internal static trait, Norton Peirce showed that investment is a sociological concept which can explain the relationship between the language and the complex and changing surroundings in a more clarified way (Norton Peirce, 1995). The theory of investment by Bonny Norton implies that when some people plan to learn any language, they aim to achieve a wide range of symbolic resources such as education and friendship, as well as materialistic resources such as capital goods, wealth, monetary wealth etc. (Norton, 2013). Other studies conducted on migrant and

refugee communities show that language practice does not only take place because of the need for communication, rather, it can be driven by emotional attachment, cultural association and social status as well (Jeon, 2008; Lao & Lee, 2009). This perspective is particularly relevant for multilingual environments where people of minority languages try to balance between maintaining their heritage language and developing skills in a socially powerful language.

2.4. The Paradox of Hegemony and Resistance

Suarez (2002) presents the “paradox of linguistic hegemony” based on the concepts of symbolic power. This theory contends that for a lot of minority communities, preserving their heritage language also demands getting skilled in dominant languages. Without achieving “linguistic capital” by learning the dominant language, it is impossible for marginalized communities to advocate for their own community and language. As a result, learning English is not merely a cultural sacrifice to the displaced people; it is a strategic weapon towards “liberatory autonomy” (Tadayon & Khodi, 2016). According to this perspective, influential language can be used as a means of empowerment, which gives agency to the marginalized community through which they can represent their culture and heritage on a global platform. The tension between English as a vehicle for social mobility and the heritage language as an “identity anchor” (Al-Khresheh, 2026) encapsulates the sociolinguistic conflict experienced by displaced students as they navigate competing linguistic and cultural identities.

2.5. Domain Analysis and the Maintenance of the Heritage Language

Fishman’s (1964) domain analysis can be used to explain the survival of a heritage language amidst a power struggle. Fishman argues that a minority language can only survive if it can secure a strong position within the social domain. Most importantly a minority language must maintain status within the family domain, which Fishman termed as maintaining a

“functional niche” within the larger social domain. Language shift occurs when the boundaries between these domains become weak. If students are groomed in an intensive academic setting, the “academic domain” often influences the students’ personal choices because they start relying more on the academic language in their regular social conversation. Thus, Rohingya language maintenance largely depends on how successfully the refugee students can separate their private domains from the invasion of influential academic language. Confirming Fishman’s (1964) contention of the importance of language maintenance within the family domain, in their study of various refugee settings, Alsahafi (2019) and Neloy (2025), suggest that long-term vitality of the heritage language is largely determined by the resilience of the home domain.

Other studies on heritage language maintenance, however, suggest that intergenerational continuity on its own is not sufficient if consistent family language policies are absent. Huang and Liao (2024) underscore that parental linguistic ideology, regular language practice and active language management can actively influence the heritage language maintenance in multilingual families. However, it has also been demonstrated that the youngest members of the families, especially pre-teenagers, often create a bottom-up barrier by resisting the use of heritage language, advocating instead for the use of the socially influential language (Huang & Liao, 2024). These findings suggest that the preservation of a language is not determined solely by parents or institutions; instead, it emerges through ongoing negotiation within family interactions. Several studies supported Fishman and identified family as the most important and primary domain of heritage language preservation. Research conducted in refugees from China, Korea and Myanmar proves that intergenerational communication and regular communication within family in heritage language plays central role in preserving heritage language across generations (Jeon, 2008; Zhu et al., 2020; Alsahafi, 2019). At the same time, these studies

indicate that, institutional support alone often is not enough if family and society are not involved in preserving the heritage language.

2.6 Settlement Context and Rohingya Language Vitality

A critical observation of the current studies reveals that Rohingya language maintenance of Rohingya communities is not a segregated or uniform experience, rather it is largely determined by the spatial structure of the host environment. The work of Neloy (2025) and Alsahafi (2019, 2020) provides us with a contrasting picture of how structural segregation or integration can influence the vitality of a language.

Neloy (2025) conducted a mixed-method study among 90 participants in the refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The findings indicate that these camps function as linguistic sanctuaries for the Rohingya refugee people. As the Rohingya refugee people are united in the camps with high concentration, their community domain and family domain are strongly merged. Also, the detachment from the Bengali community plays an important role. As a result, this detachment as well as their unity blocks or slows down the process. On top of that, Neloy (2025) also found that Rohingya refugees in the refugee camps possess a positive attitude towards their heritage language as they perceive their language as the strongest tie to their homeland and identity.

In contrast, Alsahafi (2019, 2020) conducted his study among Rohingya community people in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In contrast to Neloy (2025), Alsahafi identified a noticeable “domain loss” of Rohingya language in that area. The reason behind the stark difference lies in the concentration and the distribution of the Rohingya people. Unlike Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees in Saudi Arabia are integrated into a broader

linguistic zone, where Arabic holds power, and is positioned as holding the highest symbolic capital in the linguistic market. As a result, even if Rohingya language is alive among the first generation Rohingya community, the language domain gradually starts to shift towards Arabic for the next generation onwards.

However, Alsahafi (2020) also demonstrated that Rohingya refugees living in Saudi Arabia did not completely abandon their heritage language despite the heavy influence of Arabic. Participants of the research study mentioned positive attitudes towards both English and Arabic which indicates that they prefer functional bilingualism than complete linguistic assimilation. In this context, Arabic is found to be linked with educational, religious and financial mobility. On the other hand, Rohingya language is deeply connected with ethnic identity and internal solidarity of the community. This indicates that in some particular socio-cultural situations, heritage language maintenance and acquisition of dominant language can coexist together.

The difference between two different studies can be explained by the “language market” available to the participants. According to the study done by Neloy (2025), the refugee population in the camps in Bangladesh is not motivated to shift towards Bangla, socially and economically, because the government's policies are restrictive in terms of interaction with host communities as well as the use of Bangla for instruction in the camps. However, the motivation to shift towards Arabic that Alsahafi (2019, 2020) noted amongst the refugees in Saudi Arabia is significant because of the shared living space with Arabic spoken local people, perceived educational and professional opportunities, and the religious tie with Arabic language. These contrasting findings imply that language maintenance and shift also depends on and is influenced by the sociolinguistic structures of the host community that include layers of social integration, mobility and access to linguistic institutions of dominant languages.

2.7: The Emotional Toll of Identity Negotiation

The negotiation of heritage language versus dominant language, in combination with the concept of investment proposed by Norton Peirce (1995), suggests that the identity construction of displaced people is a site of struggle characterized by high emotional labor. This struggle is even more extreme for a refugee student, as she/he has to carry a disregarded, stigmatized and marginalized national identity while navigating a new academic identity.

Norton Peirce (1995) argues that an investment made by a student in learning English is strongly interconnected with their social identity. Several studies regarding “migrant professionals”, including by Zhang (2009), indicate that the decision of investing towards a particular language is often very practical as it is shaped by their conscious effort of pursuing a career. However, for refugee students, stigma and alienation remain a major concerning part in the process.

In an English-medium institution, the “refugee scholar” often experiences what Bourdieu describes as “symbolic violence.” According to previous studies on refugee students, speakers of minority languages often feel a pressure to hide their cultural as well as linguistic identity in an environment where influential languages hold higher symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton Peirce, 1995). Studies on identity negotiation of refugees indicate that linguistic transformation may create distance, feelings of separation or emotional exhaustion as the people going through the transformation constantly try to coordinate between institutional expectation and accountability towards their community (Jeon, 2008; Lao & Lee, 2009).

2.8: Methodological Review: Uncovering the Hidden Linguistic Self

There is a noteworthy difference in the methodological approaches of studies investigating heritage language maintenance (HLM) of displaced communities. Whereas some studies draw upon quantitative approaches, others emphasize qualitative stories. For example, Neloy (2025) and Klapwijk (2016) used quantitative Likert-scale questions to measure attitudes towards language. Although these instruments are effective in identifying broad trends and reported preferences, they often fail to capture the actual picture of conflict.

On the other hand, researchers such as Norton Peirce (1995), Jeon (2008), and Lao and Lee (2009) used qualitative semi-structured interview questions. The reason behind their preference towards qualitative methods is their interest in bringing out the “hidden” emotions of the participants entangled with their language – fear of guilt, incidents of bullying or feeling of separation. These emotional aspects are extremely difficult to capture through quantitative surveys, as surveys constrain participants to choose from available options on a questionnaire.

A careful review of the methodology of the previous studies has led this study to undertake a qualitative approach so that the perceptions and experiences of the Rohingya students at this university can be captured as fully as possible. Suarez (2002), in his studies, stated that the students often expressed paradoxical views while talking about their language – they mentioned that they “love” their heritage language, but they “prefer” English for a secured future. A qualitative methodological approach through semi-structured interviews enables a researcher to dig deep into these conflicts. This method allows the participants to explain why they had to hide her identities in the classroom, or how they feel while struggling to find proper Rohingya words while having conversations with parents or siblings, for example.

2.9: Research Gap

Although there has been increasing research about the language of Rohingya refugees, a theoretical gap is still present. Existing studies are mostly focused on the camp-based Rohingya refugees, which seek to investigate the challenges and survival strategies of Rohingya refugees living in camps (Neloy, 2025). Other studies shed light on the family domain (“Family Unit Study”). These studies basically observe the transition and transformation of language usage in daily life in conventional family settings across generations (Alsahafi, 2019; Zhang, 2009).

Furthermore, most of the existing research examined heritage language maintenance in family or community settings where heritage language is socially visible and regularly practiced collaboratively (Fishman, 1964; Alsahafi, 2019; Zhu et al., 2020). Very little attention has been given to refugee students who are studying in transnational educational institutions. Settings where influential academic language not only functions as the means of communication in the classroom, but also controls social belonging, professional aspirations and intellectual legitimacy as well (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton Peirce, 1995; Klapwijk & van der Walt, 2016).

In this regard, a gap exists in the research literature: there is a lack of studies on Rohingya refugees outside camp settings, especially those who are interacting in international higher education settings. This English-medium liberal arts university is a unique setting because it compels the Rohingya students to engage in a linguistic and identity struggle by using English as the primary language in daily life. Hence, in the English-dominant environment, they constantly face a challenge of balancing the maintenance of their own language while developing their proficiency in English. Moreover, although Lao and Lee (2009) conducted research on 1.5 generation Khmer students in the USA, research on first generation female Rohingya students is an added dimension in the current study. Hence, by highlighting the experiences of Rohingya

students at this university, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature. Rather than viewing Rohingya refugees as victims of an unprecedented situation, it portrays them as people whose lives are undergoing transition due to their unique circumstances. Also, rather than only focusing on the family aspect, this study expands the research horizon by exploring the impact of the institutional setting on language and identity: how Rohingya refugees are thinking about themselves, their language, identity and future.

3: Materials and Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of Rohingya female students who have been exposed to English language learning over an extended period of time. A qualitative design is appropriate for this study as it ensures an in-depth understanding of personal narratives and insights related to the tension between language loss and maintenance as well as identity negotiation as a result of long-time exposure to an English dominant environment. The focus was on reflecting the voices of the participants rather than describing the phenomenon from an outside point of view. The core focus was on what they experience in terms of their heritage language as a result of learning English and how they feel about it while experiencing it. Additionally, identity formation, the sense of authenticity and emotional attachment to heritage language, is a complex sociocultural process that cannot be fully understood through numerical measurement alone. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that a phenomenological approach is particularly helpful when the goal is to capture the meaningful experience of an important phenomenon that happened in participants' lives. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this approach allows the researcher to reduce individual experiences of a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. The goal of this study is to shed light on the essence of the lived reality of experiencing language loss and language maintenance by Rohingya female students.

3.2 Research Materials

The primary research material in this investigation was a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) so that the linguistic trajectories as well as the self-perceptions of the participants could be clearly reflected. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) described, a semi-structured

interview “is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena”. Following this method, open-ended questions were included in the semi-structured interviews. The purpose was to explore how students encounter the transformation in their language usage in the personal as well as the institutional domain, how they deal with stigma or feelings of alienation, and what they feel about the necessity of intergenerational continuation of Rohingya language in the long term. The open-ended nature of the interview protocol allows flexibility to probe the participants further based on their individual responses. At the same time, it also ensures that any unexpected insight is taken into account while preserving a core focus on the central phenomenon (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Along with the interview guide, necessary institutional materials were also developed following the ethical research guidelines of University Ethical Research Committee to ensure safety and dignity of the participants. Special emphasis was given to the safeguarding as the participants belong to a vulnerable community. As a part of the safeguards, a thorough informed consent process was included, and participants were also informed about voluntary participation as well as confidentiality maintained by the researcher. The researcher was also aware of potential trauma-induced concerns while interviewing the participants, and measures were also taken to mitigate the power imbalances between the researcher and the students. Preserving the anonymity of participants was specifically prioritized given the relatively small and interconnected nature of the Rohingya student community. As indicated by British Educational Research Association, establishing proper documentation is crucial for protecting participants who belong to marginalized and vulnerable community (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). Prior to interview phase, informed consent was taken from all

participants. With proper consent, the interview was recorded using digital equipment so that the interview data could go through necessary transcription and analysis process.

3.3 Research Location

This study was conducted entirely inside an English-medium higher education institution in Bangladesh.

3.3.1 Institutional Setting

To get a concrete idea regarding the context of the participants, it is necessary to describe the sociolinguistic environment of the research site. The selected educational institution is an independent, international, residential liberal arts university for women which is dedicated towards women's higher education and leadership development. The university aims towards the recruitment of talented yet marginalized female students from Asia and Middle East representing diverse national, ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Particularly, the university seeks to enroll at least half of their students from communities that are marginalized, or displaced by war or political reasons. As a result, the university is home to students from at least 15 different countries across Asia.

The linguistic diversity of the selected educational institution is crucial for this study. This university follows a complete liberal arts curriculum where the only medium of instruction is English. Despite the enrollment of students from multilingual backgrounds, students have to use English as a common language of communication. For non-native English speakers, it offers a pre-undergraduate bridge program, where students are placed into intensive English language courses, so that they are better prepared for their undergraduate journey.

As a result, the university creates a unique linguistic environment in which Rohingya students must undergo a rapid linguistic transformation from their heritage language to English, a language that holds significant power as the sole medium of institutional communication and academic evaluation. This specific background forms what sociolinguists identify as a high-pressure environment where a dominant language can easily invade minority linguistic domains (Fishman, 1964).

3.3.2 Positionality of Researcher

In qualitative research, researchers play crucial roles in data collection as well as interpretation which makes reflexivity and positionality of the researcher very important (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, it is crucial that I clarify my positionality regarding Rohingya female participants in higher educational settings so that the shared as well as unshared understanding can be clarified. I have a shared experience with Rohingya students as I have also studied in the same institution, and navigated the English language dominant academic environment. However, there is a substantial lack in terms of shared understanding as I do not have experience of forceful displacement and statelessness. Acknowledging the common grounds as well the distinct differences were significant to ensure that I approached them with empathy and inquiry rather than following my own unexamined assumptions.

3.3.3 Physical Interview Setting

Interviews were conducted in-person within the university premises. To maintain privacy and provide a quiet environment, the interviews were arranged in quiet places such as designated study blocks or conference rooms. For this phenomenological study, allocating comfortable and private spaces was methodologically important as the participants were required to reflect on

identity, linguistic trajectory, as well as marginalization and displacement. As mentioned by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), safe space is extremely important for establishing an environment where participants can share their experiences without any fear of being exposed as it creates a power balance between the participant and the interviewer.

3.4 Participants

The participants were all Rohingya students, currently enrolled in pre-undergraduate, undergraduate or postgraduate studies, who had substantial exposure to the English dominant learning environment. With respect to the study's core focus of exploring linguistic and identity negotiation, a strict criterion-based purposive sampling strategy was applied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The final inclusion criteria required that participants must:

1. Self-identify as ethnically Rohingya.
2. Be currently enrolled as an active student at the university within pre-undergraduate, undergraduate or postgraduate program.
3. Have completed a minimum of four years of continuous academic residency at the institution including the pre-undergraduate bridge programs.

As a result, the final sample consisted of 10 Rohingya students. As the university is an all-women university, all 10 participants were female. Among them, 2 students are in pre-undergraduate level, 6 students are studying at the undergraduate level, and 2 of them are in postgraduate level (Appendix B). This criterion was methodologically necessary to capture the perception of students who experienced linguistic transformation. Studies in second language acquisition and bilingualism indicate that although basic conversational learning happens at the

early stage of language acquisition, a multi-year horizon is needed to internalize the systematic power dynamics of an academic language (Cummins, 2000; Fishman, 1964). By selecting students across advanced undergraduate and master's students, the study aimed to capture experiences of individuals who, as a result of experiencing long-term second language acquisition, possess the linguistic capital which enables them to evaluate their own experiences from a critical point of view (Bourdieu, 1991; Norton Peirce, 1995).

The sample size of 10 was fixed in alignment with qualitative methodology. As underscored by Creswell and Poth (2018), when no thematic patterns or insights emerge from the interviews that are significantly new, data saturation is achieved and depth is ensured within the scope. In this study, after 10 participants, data started becoming repetitive with no significant new themes emerging. Thus, stopping the interview at 10 participants allowed the researcher to go in-depth within the limited scope of a master's thesis project.

3.5 Data Collection

Data was collected through face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. The researcher conducted the interview in-person to explore students' personal experiences while allowing flexibility to probe the participants further based on their individual responses. Although the interviews were planned to finish approximately within 45 to 60 minutes, some interviews expanded beyond the estimated timeline as the participants were invited to reflect more deeply. This flexible timeline allowed participants to ponder over their experiences, and at the same time, it allowed the researcher not only to capture their words, but also their expressions. As stated by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), this exploration of emotional nuances allows the participants to go through deep phenomenological reflection.

The data collection process was conducted according to the following timeline:

1. **Initial Contact and Rapport Building:** The participants who met the criteria were contacted individually by the researcher. Later on, the researcher spent some time explaining the nature and rationale of the study.
2. **Pre-Interview Briefing:** After a participant expressed their interest in taking part in the study, each of them was provided with a participant information sheet and a consent form. Based on their preference, the researcher either read the information to the participants or they were given enough time to read and understand the study. They were also encouraged to ask any questions they might have to clarify any doubt they might have. They were also informed explicitly that the participation is voluntary and withdrawal at any stage is possible.
3. **Execution of the Interview:** After briefing and completing necessary procedures, the researcher conducted the interview. With permission of the participants, the interview was recorded on a recording device. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher asked some general warm-up questions so that the participants had a chance to feel relaxed and comfortable before going towards in-depth exploration. Once the core interview began, the researcher used the semi-structured interview guide to direct the participants.
4. **Active Interview Management:** In accordance with the phenomenological study design, the researcher used the interview guide as a foundation but allowed the conversation to progress based on the participants' responses. When necessary, the researcher asked follow up questions to probe the participants' experiences and perspectives. The

participants were asked to answer questions, but they were also given substantial time and scope to reflect. As demonstrated by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), allowing the participants to have silence helps the participants formulate complex reflections on the topic they find extremely difficult to express verbally.

3.6 Data Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, adapted for a phenomenological approach. The six-step method is well-suited for identifying patterns and meaning within qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis provides a systematic yet flexible approach that allows the identification and interpretation of recurring themes across participants' lived experiences. For this phenomenological study, the six-step approach was adapted according to the transcendental phenomenological orientation established by Moustakas (1994) following the steps below:

Step 1: Data Familiarization: After completing careful verbatim transcription, the researcher went through the transcribed notes to gain an overall idea about the experience of the participants. In this stage, the researcher took reflective notes and wrote down her preliminary observations. Following the epoche (bracketing) rules of phenomenological study, the researcher carefully kept aside her prior assumptions and existing knowledge regarding language maintenance and identity, so that the study successfully captures the perception of the participants.

Step 2: Generation of Initial Codes: Transcripts were analyzed line by line, and significant information related to Rohingya language maintenance and loss, and their experience regarding their identity negotiation was identified and coded accordingly. Following Horizontalization

concept of Moustakas (1994), all relevant sentences were given equal importance at first before determining their importance.

Step 3: Search for themes: At this stage, codes, which were conceptually similar, were accumulated together to form primary themes. Those themes reflected the experience of participants regarding language use and identity negotiation as well as their realization, emotion, perception, and interpretation of their experience.

Step 4: Reviewing and Refining Themes: Primary themes were cross checked with the main transcripts, so that proper representation of the participants can be ensured. Further, the themes were merged or refined as needed to make sure that they are strongly aligned with the research questions.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes: Each of the themes was well defined based on the larger phenomenon that is represented by the particular theme. Special attention was given to observe what meaning the participants incorporate with English language as well as Rohingya language and how they define cultural belonging and identity negotiation.

Step 6: Producing the Report: At the final stage, an overall complete description was composed by accumulating all the findings across different themes. With the help of the phenomenological structure of Moustakas (1994), the “what” part of the participants’ experience was considered as “textural description” and the “how” part was considered as the “structural description”. Through those descriptions, the researcher tried to capture the essence of the lived experience of the heritage language loss and maintenance as well as the identity negotiation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study followed institutional academic integrity guidelines and international standards for research to ensure safety and dignity of the participants - specifically because it includes students from the Rohingya community. Prior to the interview phase, informed consent was taken from all participants. Lastly, participants signed a written consent form prior to the interview (in-person). Confidentiality and data protection were ensured by removing personal identification and assigning pseudonyms. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in password protected Google drive as well as personal devices only available to the researcher. No identifying information was disclosed in presentation or publication. To minimize harm, participants were not asked to share sensitive personal information. The interviewer reminded participants about their rights to withdraw if anyone seemed to feel discomfort. Lastly, proper institutional permission was taken through Ethical Review Committee (ERC), and relevant institutional guidelines and protocol were strictly followed. Use of these rigorous safety measures strictly aligns with global ethical frameworks established for qualitative studies involving displaced and linguistically vulnerable student populations (BERA, 2018).

3.8 Trustworthiness

For ensuring the research rigor, this study has ensured trustworthiness following the framework of Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through in-person in-depth interviews along with the verbatim transcription of the interviews. As a result, the study could capture the lived experience of the participants. To ensure transferability, the context, sampling procedure, and demographic features of the participants have been described in detail. Thus, future researchers will be able to evaluate the suitability of the findings of this study in a similar setting. To maintain

dependability, a detailed methodological description was included where the full description of the whole research process - starting from the purposive sampling process to Braun and Clarke's six-step process was enlisted. To ensure confirmability, phenomenological epoche (bracketing) was performed by the researcher. Through that, the researcher, keeping her prior assumption and personal opinion aside, could understand the experience of the participants from their perspective. As a result, the themes reflected the actual experience of the participants without being influenced by any outside bias.

4: Analysis and Findings

This chapter reports the results of this phenomenological study which investigates the experiences of ten Rohingya women in an English-medium liberal arts university in relation to heritage language maintenance, loss, and identity negotiation. The participants' names have been anonymized throughout this Chapter. Five interconnected themes are used in the analysis: Choosing When to Hide and When to Show, Feeling Distant from One's Own Language, The Double-Edged Role of English, Finding Safe Spaces for Culture, and Taking Pride in Identity. These themes together show the journey participants have made, from hiding, from feeling insecure in their heritage language and from distrust and rejection of their Rohingya identity to building confidence and pride in their Rohingya identity.

4.1: Choosing When to Hide and When to Show

4.1.1 Hiding Identity to Get an Education

While talking about their experience in the English-medium university, participants also described instances where they had to mask their identity for survival in Bangladesh due to the fact that Bangladesh does not legally allow Rohingya students to get enrolled in school outside the camp or participate in any examination. Zaitun detailed how she maintained a “fake” identity throughout her secondary and higher secondary level of schooling in Bangladesh, a sacrifice she needed to make to bypass structural barriers. As she said, “...I finished my HSC... without my identity... fake identity because Rohingyas are not allowed to study...” This practice of identity concealment continued even after their arrival at university, as students encountered multifaceted challenges in the campus. Observing existing attitudes within the university, Jamira admitted that she chose to cover her true self as she was afraid to, noting, “because people treated them very

badly... For that fear, I used to give, like I used to say I am from Bangladesh”. This act of concealment was not a choice that the participants made out of their will, rather, it was a response to the unfavorable surroundings they have encountered. As they knew that failure to conceal their identity would invite mistreatment and discrimination from their Bangladeshi peers, so the options - either hiding or showing- were not eventually two neutral options for the participant. Rather, hiding identity was the only option she was left out with.

Another participant, Hamida, reflected on this reality: “I am Rohingya. I am speaking with you, but I have to maintain another identity... I have to live in Bangladesh”. These accounts demonstrate how the participants, either by force or by choice, needed to hide their identity for their own betterment. As Zaitun noted, “If it is very necessary to hide the identity, I would advise them to hide because of our betterment”. Overall, this sub-theme reveals that Rohingya students do not consider identity as a permanent attribute, rather they often find it a potentially harmful tag that they have, which needs to be managed strategically in order to mitigate the threatening situation.

4.1.2 Protection from Judgment and Exposure

Participants mentioned that they had to actively work on protecting themselves from judgment by hiding their identity. They pointed out that they especially hid their language as it could reveal their identity easily. The participants underscored having constant worry of being judged because of their identity. Soe San talked about how she felt insecure imagining the consequences of others knowing her identity: “I had an insecurity... what if people knew our identity? How would they judge us?” This pervasive sense of insecurity reveals how the “gaze” of the host society is internalized by the Rohingya student, forcing her to treat her own heritage as a source of potential danger.

Participants also mentioned different strategies they used to tackle the challenges based on different situations. Rahima shed light on the profound worry that they have to carry. She said, “When anyone calls from our family... we just speak so slowly so that no one can hear”. It was evident from her example that there is a constant tension of being recognized which follows her even when she is talking to her family from the university. Jamira mentioned an instance where she was feeling uncomfortable because of the judgment towards her identity and eventually, she decided to move away to avoid the criticism. She stated, “I just stopped talking with them... move to that place and go to other place to speak with them”. While talking about the experience in the English-medium higher educational environment, Mong Swe also shared how she had to find different strategies on her own to hide her Rohingya identity even when they were in Myanmar. She said, “...when we were in Myanmar... We have to hide our identity... we have to speak Burmese, and we have to pretend like we are non-Rohingya”. She revealed that hiding the language is the safest way of identity concealment to ensure that their existence is not threatened. Ultimately, this sub-theme shows that Rohingya students choose the concealment of their linguistic identity as a survival mechanism.

4.1.3 Internalizing the Stigma

While talking about their experiences of linguistic alienation as well as the challenges and struggles they bear as representatives of a displaced community, the participants opened up about their observations of stigmatized attitudes of other people in their surroundings. Rita, while talking about the time when she first came to the university, expressed what type of attitude others hold regarding her language. She said, “...the students used to see us at very low level... I used to avoid using Rohingya language.”. The student indicated her clear observation of how stigmatized others’ attitudes were towards her heritage language. Rahima, highlighting an

instance of challenge, expressed how they felt adversity from Bangladeshi students on campus due to communicating in Rohingya language. She mentioned, “We also sometimes try to avoid our language in front of the Bengali students... Because sometimes we try to hide our identity...”

Nimra also mentioned how the surrounding academic environment even back in Myanmar forced them to take shelter in the Burmese language by using it as a shield. While talking about the experience of not being able to speak in their own language, she also mentioned the unavailability of books or courses in Rohingya language. She said, “...in school, we have to speak Burmese... since morning to evening... in Myanmar curriculum, there is no book or any subject like Rohingya language...”. The participant described the painful reality of being unable to speak her own language because the curriculum prohibited its use.

4.2: Feeling Distant from One’s Own Language

4.2.1 The “Blunt Knife” of Lexical Attrition

The participants expressed worry regarding poor maintenance of their heritage language throughout all interviews. Acknowledging the reality of not being able to practice Rohingya language, Amira confessed that the process of forgetting words is happening as the usage decreased after she entered into this English-medium higher educational environment. She mentioned, “If we don’t use a knife, it becomes blunt, right? So, kind of like somehow, we are forgetting some of the words because I’m not using it...”. While shedding light on decreasing use and words getting forgotten, Amira used the metaphor “knife” to explain how lack of practice weakened her Rohingya language skill.

Jamira expressed deep concern regarding loss of words in Rohingya language because of the fact that she gets much less opportunity to practice the Rohingya language inside the institution. She mentioned, "...I use Rohingya language very rarely because ...[this university] is all about English... I feel like I'm losing my words.". Pointing out the fact that she has been living in an all-English environment, Jamira shared that she hardly uses Rohingya which made her realize that she is gradually "losing her words."

Mong Swe reflected a similar scenario. She mentioned, "...for now everywhere is like English and we are not quite practicing Rohingya, and we are forgetting a lot of words in Rohingya..." Pondering over the situation, she accepted the fact that they are not practicing Rohingya as they used to do before which is causing them to lose many words in Rohingya language. Overall, the participants expressed concern regarding less practice and increasing word loss in Rohingya language due to structural barriers. Rahima, while being asked about the perception towards loss, was surprised to find out that she cannot remember a lot of words in her language. As she said, "we forgot some words... feelings... we do not know how to say in Rohingya language..." Rahima demonstrated a sense of losing the grip on her language. Collectively, the participants' responses suggest an awareness that, although their heritage language has not been lost, its declining use and the increasing influence of English have reduced its prominence in their daily lives.

4.2.2 Thinking in One Language, Speaking in Another

Participants shared the conflict between English and Rohingya that they often encounter while speaking across different domains. Amira talked about how her thinking process is predominantly Rohingya language, and at the same time, how English is coming out of her mouth when she speaks. She said, "Mentally, my language, but it comes out English". Another

participant, Mong Swe, drawing examples of regularly used words such as “breakfast”, pointed towards the increasing English dominance on her own language usage, “English is dominating Rohingya... for example, breakfast, lunch, dinner, I used to say differently in Rohingya when I was in the camps...”. Comparing her language back in camp with her current situation, she shared that even the simple daily words such as breakfast, lunch or dinner got replaced.

Rita mentioned how suddenly she became comfortable using English across all settings, which, as a result, impacted her Rohingya language. She shared, “I suddenly got used to [using] English, so even in the Rohingya meeting... those words are impacting.” Drawing on her own experience, Rita showed how Rohingya language in different formal settings is also being impacted by her English usage as she is becoming more inclined towards using English. Mina highlighted her struggle of balancing English and Rohingya while speaking. She mentioned, “..when I go home... some words like in every sentence I am using English words... Even though I am trying to speak pure Rohingya language, I cannot use it because I forgot the real meaning...” Sharing the example of her struggle in using Rohingya language while talking to her family members during vacation, she pointed out that she struggles to maintain pure Rohingya language as English words keep coming which, she thinks, happened because of forgetting the words in Rohingya language due to heavy English exposure.

This cognitive interference shows that the participants are struggling internally with a conflict in their identity. While having conversations, they are not merely switching their languages, rather they are experiencing a transition in their inner self where their academic identity (English) is dominating over their authentic identity (Rohingya) which, although not willingly, has prompted them to experience a gradual erosion of their inner voice.

4.2.3 The Communicative Gap Between Students and Their Families

Another common theme that prevailed was the communicative gap between the participants and their family members as well as relatives. The participants mentioned that the gap emerged as participants gradually became proficient in English whereas their families and relatives back in camp continued using Rohingya as their only means of communication. Rahima demonstrated the reality in her own words, "...we use some English vocabularies that they do not understand, and we cannot make them understand in our own languages." The double-edged challenge is clearly visible in her words - the English words that she uses are meaningless to her family members, at the same time she struggles to find the respective Rohingya words that she needs to convey her message in the moment. As a result, a communication gap emerges.

Mina shared how her aunt failed to connect to her as she used English while communicating. She said, "...when I go to visit my auntie... they are looking at me blank because they didn't understand what I was trying to say...". Mina expressed her worry as she was explaining how she felt a sense of distance from her relatives because of predominant use of English in her daily conversation. Mong Swe shed light on the increasing diminishment of her Rohingya fluency, which eventually created a distance among her relatives and herself. While talking about her relationship with her relatives and community members she mentioned, "...they are not that close to me... because my diminished fluency creates an invisible communicative barrier." She talked about her own observation of the time during her vacation when she went back to her community and felt a barrier between herself and the relatives.

This phenomenon illustrates a profound sense of "liminality"—the students are becoming strangers in both worlds. By adopting the linguistic capital of the university, they are gradually

distancing themselves from their roots, which, as a result, creates a communication gap with their community members.

4.2.4 The Sadness of Not Knowing the Written Script

Another common theme that emerged from the participants was the sadness of not knowing the Rohingya written script. The participants mentioned that as a result of not knowing the written script, their learning was done in a scattered way. Although the participants mentioned the emergence of Rohingya written script, they also explained that they have had few opportunities to learn or become proficient in reading and writing it. Rahima shared the fact of not knowing the script from the initial stage. She said, "...we don't know the script from the beginning... we speak, and we cannot read that one...". She talked about her limited access to Rohingya language which is confined to speaking.

Mina pointed out that learning Rohingya was achieved mostly as a form of listening. She mentioned, "...I learned Rohingya language just by listening and hearing from everybody. We have never studied Rohingya language..." Living in an environment where she learned English academically, Mina realized that the learning process of the Rohingya language was predominantly informal. Rahima also mentioned the scarcity of skilled educators. She said, "...there is no teacher, there is no one that I can learn the script and words..." She mentioned that despite having interest, she could not find anyone who knows the written script or the written letters / words and that made her unaware of the written script till now. Overall, the participants expressed that the more they improve their English, the more they are concerned about not knowing Rohingya enough, particularly after the recent invention of the Rohingya written script. Not knowing the written script of their language made them feel fragile in terms of their identity. As their language is only practiced orally, they perceive that the existence of their

language as well as their identity is uncertain, leaving them feeling a profound sense of vulnerability.

4.3: The Double-Edged Role of English

4.3.1 Using English to Build a Future

Another theme which emerged was the perception of participants towards English where they acknowledge the importance of English as a tool for structural mobility. Using the term “passport”, Mong Swe mentioned how English can open the door to explore multidimensional opportunities all over the world. She mentioned, “English is like passport to our opportunities around the world, going, traveling, education opportunities...”. She highlighted her realization that English is a key to academic as well as travelling opportunities.

Amira pointed out that English is perceived as the only language that can ensure access to and success in higher education. She said, “I think I might go abroad for higher studies, so there will be English, not my language... mostly 90% in English.” She underscored that English is the only language which can help her study abroad. She affirmed that she needs to choose English over any other language including Rohingya if she wants to go for higher studies abroad.

Zaitun acknowledged the role of English for building a career. She mentioned, “English is to make our career”, while another participant Mong Swe shared her perception towards English highlighting her growing interest in English ever since she started thinking about her career and higher studies. She said, “Ever since I learned English, I am always interested to speak in English more than in Rohingya... I’m just very connected to English right now...” She highlighted the importance of English- particularly because of building a global career. The participants expressed a willingness to invest in developing their English language skills as a

means of acquiring symbolic capital and strengthening their ability to advocate for their rights on a global platform.

4.3.2 Learning History Through English

The participants also acknowledged the role of English in understanding as well as preserving the Rohingya culture and history. Mina mentioned how easy it is for her to access all the information about the history of Rohingya community, as everything is written in English. She said, “English is helping me a lot [to understand Rohingya history] as everything is in English.” She pointed out the fact that English has opened a door of knowledge regarding Rohingya history, and it is only because of her English learning that she is able to access the history, which brought her even closer to her Rohingya roots. Rahima also reflected on the same realization. She said, “...it’s English who is mostly helping to preserve the Rohingya culture, because people are writing in it...” She mentioned that English is directly helping the Rohingya people preserve their culture as they can write about themselves in English to inform the world about their history and culture. Mina talked about English being the lens through which she could rediscover her own community. She said, “English is the medium through which I discover my community, as the academic resources on Rohingya are in English”. Focusing on the fact that English is the universal medium in which all the academic information regarding Rohingya community, language and overall history is written, she found it really helpful to learn English as it helped her to gain more academic knowledge on the Rohingya community.

4.3.3 Lived Realities of Linguistic Competition and Exclusion

Participants showed a picture of their lived experience of linguistic competition. Participants shared instances where various social and institutional pressures compelled them to

use English, even when they would have preferred speaking in Rohingya. As a result, they experienced a significant loss of autonomy in choosing their own language. Mina, who was the only one Rohingya student in her class, talked about situations where English was the only means of communication for her. She mentioned, "...if they become my classmate... they're from the same country, and they're talking in English, but suddenly they switch to their own language... I feel left out." She pointed out that being the only one in her class made her feel alienated, as a result she realized that being able to speak in English is the only way to engage with her classmates in a meaningful way.

Rahima talked about external pressure which forced them to concentrate on learning English. She said, "...teachers told us not to talk in this language (Rohingya) inside the class, because (otherwise) we are not learning English...". She talked about having institutional pressure which eventually made them focus on learning and practicing English particularly during the class time. Mina, however, depicted a different scenario. She mentioned getting negative feedback from her Rohingya classmates while trying to practice English outside her class. She said, "they [fellow Rohingya friends] taunt me a lot about that [using English words] ... they say you are trying to show off." This two-sided tension creates a particularly difficult struggle for Rohingya students. On one side, they feel pressure from the institution to embrace English, yet on the other side, they are judged by the people of their own community for losing their fluency in their heritage language. In navigating this particular struggle, the participants mentioned that they have to go through continuous negotiation between English and Rohingya language.

4.4: Finding Safe Spaces for Culture

4.4.1 The Dormitory as a Small Home

The participants perceived their university dormitories as safe units where they could practice Rohingya language with their roommates or dormmates as much as they wanted. Amira shared her experience of being able to speak the Rohingya language as long as she stays inside the room. She said, "...After coming here I mostly use English... but as long as I'm in the room, I use the Rohingya language." Emphasizing the fact that she mostly speaks in English after coming to university, she also shared how her room turned into her homelike place where she can speak in her own language with her Rohingya friends or family members over phone.

Another participant, Rahima, mentioned having opportunities to share a room with people from the Rohingya community. She mentioned, "I have opportunity to stay in the same room... We also do cooking." Pointing out the fact that she has a Rohingya roommate, she perceived it as an "opportunity" to practice Rohingya language in an environment similar to her home. Moreover, she also mentioned that spending some time with Rohingya friends in the dorm, for example, cooking in the kitchen allowed her to communicate more in Rohingya language. Here, the participants consider the dormitory as a safe space where they can speak in the Rohingya language without fear of being judged. By creating these small enclaves, the participants enabled active resistance against the massive influence of the English-medium institution.

4.4.2 Relying on Friends for Support

Both for gaining proficiency in English, or being able to practice Rohingya, participants highlighted the importance of having strong peer support systems. Mina mentioned how having

fellow Rohingya people around herself allowed her to continue practicing her own language despite being in an English-dominant environment. She said, “If I don’t have Rohingya [people] around me, I would maybe totally stop speaking my language.” She found it extremely helpful to have fellow Rohingya classmates and friends around the campus with whom she could speak in Rohingya which ultimately refrained her from complete shutdown of Rohingya language. Mong Swe, while focusing on the goal of getting better in English, also pointed out that peer support played an important role in maintaining the continuous practice of English. She said, “...because we need English here, we are always thinking about only getting better in English... even when my friends are speaking in Rohingya to me, and I was always telling them... to speak in English with me...”. Emphasizing the fact that she is seeking continuous improvement in English, she shared her strategy of seeking help from her fellow Rohingya friends so that they can consciously include English in their regular communication rather than only depending on Rohingya language.

4.4.3 Spatial Avoidance of the Dominant Gaze

While discussing the challenges they faced in maintaining their heritage language, the participants also described the strategies they used to navigate these challenges and avoid uncomfortable interactions. When asked about strategies she uses to handle uncomfortable comments or gaze, Jamira mentioned, “... if somebody is looking at me very weirdly while I am speaking, I just stop and move [from] that place and go to other place to speak.” The experience showed her resilience; instead of abandoning her own language practice, she relocated and continued practicing her own language. This illustrates how participants actively negotiated unfavorable environments while trying to preserve their language. Rahima talked about the strategy they employ to avoid being identified as “Rohingya” in front of Bangladeshi people

inside the institution. She said, "...we also sometimes try to avoid our language in front of the Bengali students... When we talk, they're gonna understand everything..." She explained that due to language similarities, it is easier for Bangladeshi people to identify their Rohingya ethnicity. As a result, to avoid potential negative remarks, the Rohingya participants consciously avoid using the Rohingya language while actively using English to ensure that people cannot recognize them. Ultimately, this spatial avoidance suggests that Rohingya students perceive their surroundings as sites of constant surveillance, where their identities and actions are subject to scrutiny. Their conscious relocation from one place to another to express themselves in their heritage language demonstrates a deliberate strategy to protect their identities from being exposed and judged by others.

4.5: Taking Pride in Identity

4.5.1 Identity as a Personal Strength

The participants gradually expressed that their Rohingya identity is not a weakness or burden; rather it is a fundamental and strong part of their identity. Hamida said, "my identity is my superpower, that's what I believe. I put that on my Facebook profile..." showing that she is fearless to show her identity even in an open digital platform. Mina expressed a similar realization: "...I never tell them [international peers] that I'm from Myanmar... But after one semester, I realized, why should I not tell them? Why should I hide it's my identity, and I accept." This tendency demonstrates an important transition of the participants from their perception discussed in the earlier themes where they carefully tried to hide their identity. Focusing on the maintenance of the Rohingya identity despite earning new opportunities through English, Zaitun mentioned: "I should be proud with my real identity... As I get one opportunity...it does not mean that I forget my own identity."

Participants repeatedly underscored that it is not necessary that one has to forget the root for personal gain or achievement. Nimra said, “Obviously, it is [Rohingya]... Because it’s my own language, and it’s a part of my identity... for developing myself, I cannot lose my identity...”. This realization of transitioning from “hiding the identity to survive” to “accepting the identity as foundation” reflects a strong phenomenological shift. By reframing their ethnic identity as “superpower”, the participants established a cognitive reclamation, where they reject the stigmatized perception of society and confidently plan for their future while being proud of their roots.

4.5.2 Using Language and Education to tell history

Rather than considering language only as a means of communication, the participants considered it as a strong weapon for establishing their social and political presence. Amira depicted the usage of language as the process of restoring dignity. She said, “I can say now proudly that I have my own [language], that’s the key... we are not stealing someone’s language.” Jamira also expressed a strong desire to utilize their language as a weapon to challenge the longstanding marginalization as well as others’ negligence towards them. She said, “I want to show the world there are some people existing called Rohingya... I want to show that.”

This desire is also very much connected with their future goals. Mong Swe mentioned, “...I want to be like an interpreter, very professional interpreter, and then explain people... helping my community...” She expressed her deep desire to help her community through her knowledge and English skill. From their expressions, it was evident that beyond being a stepping stone for individual development, learning English gave them an immense opportunity to perform their responsibilities for their community. Participants were strongly motivated to

become active contributors in the preservation of the history and resilience of the Rohingya community by being vocal about it rather than by passively being the subjects of others' interpretation. By ensuring the proper utilization of linguistic and educational capital they have achieved, they wanted to ensure a worldwide acceptance of the existence and lived experiences of the Rohingya community.

4.5.3 Role of digital platforms

The participants mentioned gaining strength and inspiration from digital platforms and global youth culture. Soe San noted how social media platforms helped them to change their orientation towards hiding identity and secrecy: "I have watched a lot of videos like on social media, like you don't have to hide your identity." Rahima mentioned some Rohingya young online activists who gave them inspiration: "...there is also in a group on social media, they named it [Rohingya] Gen Z... They only want to preserve Rohingya language." The participants see this cultural expression as a form of digital advocacy. Zaitun said, "Recently there are some talented people there singing in our language... It is also one way to preserve [our language]". These experiences indicate the emergence of a digital diaspora, where refugee people can cross geographical limitations or adverse sociopolitical environments. This transition shows that digital platforms are playing a significant role in creating awareness about the preservation of the Rohingya language, culture and identity.

4.5.4 Teaching Others to Protect Culture

While being asked about their perception on the transmission of culture and language to future generations, participants expressed their willingness to protect the culture and put emphasis on transmission. When asked what advice she would give to someone who is

struggling to find an identity, Mong Swe highlighted the importance of shared responsibility. She mentioned, "...it's everyone's responsibility... to maintain that identity that we have, we had from our ancient times... I think [it's important that] we carry that responsibility for the future as well." She not only talked about maintaining the identity, but also, she emphasized on carrying that identity for the future. Rahima shared her plan of being an advocate of her heritage language by learning and teaching the Rohingya script so that the language stays alive among the next generations. She said, "I want to learn the script. I want them [the future generation] to know the script, and I want to teach them as well." She did not only emphasize on learning the written Rohingya script on her own, but she also plans to teach the script to future generations, so that the language can be strengthened further.

5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the results of the study that were presented in Chapter 4 which were derived from the research questions and the theories presented in the literature review. The themes derived from the data are organized around the five themes that emerged: identity concealment, linguistic distancing from the heritage language, the double-edged role of English, the dormitory as a space of linguistic resistance, and the gradual transition from insecurity to pride by the participants. Themes are mostly explored in terms of the theory of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (ELV) by Giles et al. (1977), as well as within the theories of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991), the language maintenance and shift theory (Fishman 1964), and the theory of investment and identity (Norton, 1995, 2013). These frameworks contribute to an understanding of the participants' heritage language's signs of attrition and vitality within the academic context where English is the dominant language, and demonstrate how the participants negotiate their linguistic and cultural identity throughout their university journeys.

5.2 Discussion on Theme 1: Choosing When to Hide and When to Show

The first theme revealed that participants were experiencing continuous struggle as they had to hide their identities and their language usage. The struggle emerged not only after they started studying at an English-medium university. Rather, they reported that they started the university with a prior experience of identity concealment. While some participants shared their identity concealment history back in Myanmar, as there was no institutional support for Rohingya language in the formal education stream of Myanmar, some other students talked about hiding their identity after arriving in Bangladesh so that they could enroll in the mainstream education system. Additionally, participants mentioned that they needed to hide their

identity in the university so that they could avoid being judged. These findings suggest that the participants encountered multi-layered challenges even before being enrolled in the university which kept them conscious all the time regarding hiding and revealing their identity.

This tension can be explained by the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (Giles et al., 1977). According to the theory, vitality of a language depends on three major things: demographic factors, institutional support and social recognition or status (Giles et al., 1977). In the case of the Rohingya participants, a lack of institutional support played a crucial role in the low vitality of the Rohingya language in both Myanmar and Bangladesh, as they had no opportunities to use or develop their language in either formal or informal educational settings. That trend continued when they started their higher education in an English-medium higher education where their heritage language was not socially accepted and they were looked down upon because of their language and identity. Over time, the lack of social recognition and institutional support resulted in the declining vitality of their heritage language.

Aligning with Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence", the participants' struggle of identity concealment reflects that they have internalized the imposed low vitality of their language and identity in an English-dominant environment. In earlier studies, the notion of identity negotiation was mostly explained through a pragmatic lens (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). However, this study, in alignment with Norton (2013), showed that for the refugee students, the process of identity negotiation is often deeply interconnected with emotional labor and stigmatization. In contrast with research which focuses on people who migrate voluntarily, these results show that the participants hid their identity as a part of their survival, which was unavoidable due to the lack of institutional support. Neloy (2025) also points to the lack of

institutional support as one of the most important reasons why the Rohingya language has low ethnolinguistic vitality.

5.3 Discussion on Theme 2: Feeling Distant from One's Own Language

The second theme revealed that the participants expressed deep worry regarding losing their daily language as they observed that they are predominantly dependent on English language for daily conversation as well as for academic purposes. Pointing to the English-dominant environment at the university, the participants mentioned that they are finding very little time for practicing Rohingya which, they think, works as a catalyst in declining their proficiency in the Rohingya language. Overall, they expressed concern over forgetting words in the Rohingya language as they are getting less opportunity to practice Rohingya. The participants also mentioned experiencing a cognitive conflict between Rohingya and English that is happening after spending a substantial amount of time in an English-dominant higher educational environment. Participants also mentioned that their diminished fluency in Rohingya directly impacts their relationships with their family and overall community members. The regret of not having a proper written script in Rohingya was also evident in the voice of the participants. These findings suggest that the participants' substantial English exposure creates a tension between them as they are actively observing their declining use of Rohingya across different domains. It also suggests that their long time English exposure in the English-medium university is adding a different layer to their relationships with their friends and families.

According to the theory of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (Giles et al., 1977), vitality of a language depends on three major things: demographic factors, institutional support and social recognition or status (Giles et al., 1977). Absence or decline of any of the components results in decreasing the vitality of the language. As discussed in the earlier theme, Rohingya participants

experience low vitality mainly due to lack of social recognition and institutional support. In this theme as well, it has been found that the participants in this study have almost no opportunity for practicing Rohingya in formal settings, whereas their informal opportunities for practicing Rohingya language are also very limited. Also, the absence of a written form of Rohingya language blocks the formal use of Rohingya language. Thus, participants' lived experience further reinforced that lack of institutional support is the most significant factor in causing low vitality of the Rohingya language among participants.

Moreover, the internal conflict of the participants can be explained by Fishman's (1964) framework of Language Maintenance and Language Loss, which argues that the maintenance of a language is largely influenced by the extent of the domains where it is used. For the Rohingya students in this study, the domains where they can practice Rohingya are very limited as they are not in constant contact with their families. Also, their educational domain is fully English which ultimately causes a domain contraction for their Rohingya language usage. Because of this contraction, the communicative barrier is evident; the academic environment demands their heavy dependence on English, which means they have only limited opportunities for practicing Rohingya. As a result, they are forgetting Rohingya words, and even their conversations in the family domain are being influenced by the encroachment of their English language.

Participants expressed fear and cognitive conflict over losing their vocabulary in their heritage language which resonates with the finding of “domain loss” among Rohingya refugees in Saudi Arabia (Alsahafi, 2019, 2020). Although Alsahafi (2019, 2020) highlighted the symbolic capital of the Arabic language, this study extends his concept in an English-medium higher education context, where English is not only an academic language but extends into the personal and family domain as well. In addition, participants expressed regret that the Rohingya

language lacks a standardized written script, reflecting its broader lack of formal recognition. This finding is consistent with Al-Khresheh (2026), who argued that the absence of formal recognition weakens a heritage language's capacity to serve as an anchor of identity for its community.

5.4 Discussion on Theme 3: The Double-Edged Role of English

Theme three revealed that participants are using English for gaining access to different academic and professional opportunities including higher studies and career building abroad terming English as a “passport”. Most of the participants expressed a strong urge to not only learn English but also to be competent in it. Multiple participants mentioned that English is a tool which can help them learn about their own history which will ultimately reinforce their sense of identity and belonging. They stated that learning English will help them explore the vast academic resources on the history of the Rohingya community as most of the academic resources are written in English, which otherwise would be inaccessible to them. They also mentioned the role of English in boosting their confidence which creates a sense of identity and belonging in the university. However, one participant mentioned that fluency in English makes her feel alienated within the Rohingya community at the university as other Rohingya students criticize her. These findings show how the double-edged role of English plays a crucial role in how the participants are navigating their identity and language. While they are trying to rediscover their roots and identity through their English competency, they also need to tackle the resistance coming from the fellow classmates from the same community inside the university. Interpreted through an ethnolinguistic lens (Giles et al., 1977), strong social recognition of English works as an influential factor in choosing the path of English as they think about their career or higher studies option.

These findings are also aligned with Norton's post-structuralist theory (2013). Renowned socio-linguist Norton (2013) argued that students decide to "invest" in learning a language when they aim for gaining symbolic (i.e. relationship, friends, community etc.) as well as materialistic resources (i.e. money, power, wealth etc.). Emphasizing the fact that identity is not a fixed idea, Norton (2013) also explained that identity construction is a complex process which is built and rebuilt not only based on a language, but also through other multidimensional factors such as power dynamics in the society, time, place, relationship and the future goals of the people who are embracing a language. In her theory, Norton (2013) also emphasized that the notion of the "imagined community", the community that a learner aspires to build, and the "imagined self", the future self that the learner wants to become play a pivotal role in shaping the learner's "agency", the act of resisting or accepting their existing identity that they have or society's perceived or imposed identity of them. In this study, as the Rohingya students want to secure their existence in the broader world, they are inclined to "invest" in English so that it brings them greater gain in terms of education and career prospects.

Using the term "passport", participants acknowledged the role of English for social as well as economic mobility. On the other hand, they also expressed concern over possible conflict emerging due to the fact that they are learning English. This two-sided perception resonates with the "paradox of hegemony" described by Suarez (2002). This study also supports the findings of Tadayon and Khodi (2016), who introduced the concept that learning English is not limited to "cultural sacrifice", rather it is utilized as a strategic means of gaining "liberatory autonomy".

5.5 Discussion on Theme 4: Finding Safe Spaces for Culture

The fourth theme described the dormitory as a safe space, where the participants actively tried to reconstruct their linguistic as well as cultural identity. In contrast to the English dominant

environment of the university, dormitories serve as informal spaces where the participants can use Rohingya language without any fear of being judged or bullied. Participants also mentioned that these spaces act as small enclaves where they continue maintaining their language, allowing them to reconnect with their heritage language. These findings suggest that the dormitory acts as an important domain of linguistic resistance for the Rohingya students, where they continue maintaining their languages against all sorts of pressures they face in the English dominant environment. Drawing on Fishman's (1964) theory of Language Maintenance and Language Loss, this process can be explained as the creation of an "alternative domain" for language maintenance. While they experience English dominance in the formal domain, they create safe spaces in dormitories as an informal domain where Rohingya language remains the primary source of communication. Moreover, from the perspective of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (Giles et al., 1977), this safe domain inside the dorms plays a crucial role in providing informal institutional support to the Rohingya students. In the absence of strong institutional support, this informal establishment of a network helps their language to achieve "vitality" through a shared linguistic space and social connections. Similar to Nelay's (2025) study where he found Rohingya refugee camps working as "linguistic sanctuaries", this study found that Rohingya refugees studying in an English-dominant higher education setting are creating micro-enclaves inside their dormitories which are functioning as "linguistic sanctuaries."

Drawing on Fishman's (1964) analysis, this result states that language maintenance does not only depend on geographical location. Rather it depends on creating a strong space which can successfully protect the language from being invaded by the influential academic language. This study also suggests that even within the English-dominant educational environment, the Rohingya students successfully established a social space utilizing their agency to ensure

intergenerational transmission. Huang and Liao (2024) emphasized the importance of creating such spaces for ensuring the maintenance of a language.

5.6 Discussion on Theme 5: Taking Pride in Identity

Theme five revealed that participants went through a transformation of realization regarding their identity. Although they had a tendency to hide their identity in the early years of university, gradually they developed confidence regarding their language and identity, and started presenting themselves with pride. Moreover, they also mentioned their aspirations to do something meaningful for their community by utilizing their competence in English. Moreover, they expressed their determination of breaking stereotypes towards the Rohingya community. Some of the participants also mentioned receiving inspiration from the young Rohingya people all over the world who are working to preserve Rohingya culture in the digital diaspora. Finally, they also talked about thoughtfully passing on their language, culture and identity. This theme suggests that the participants are overall positive towards their identity. Pride and confidence replaced insecurity and fear after spending a few years in the English-dominant environment.

These findings can be explained by Ethnolinguistic Vitality theory (Giles et al., 1977). As the social recognition of the Rohingya language is boosted through digital platforms, the vitality of the Rohingya language has increased, and participants have gained more confidence about their language. The interpretation also aligns with Fishman's (1964) theory of Language Maintenance and Language Loss, where Fishman said that language is usually maintained through the continuous practice in different "domains". In his framework, Fishman claimed that the invasion of dominant language in the domain of a non-dominant one can erode the later one, ultimately initiating the process of what he referred to as "language shift". However, he also mentioned that the "reverse language shift" in the case of a language which is at stake, can occur

through intergenerational transmission as well as successful creation of new social domains where that particular language remains the primary medium of communication. The Rohingya students found a new social domain in digital platforms which is actively working to revitalize their language through cultural preservation (songs). At the same time, they also emphasize the importance of teaching the next generation about their language, which proves that they are committed towards intergenerational transmission. Thus, it can be concluded that they are actively working towards the process of language maintenance.

The transition from fear to pride is similar to what Alsahafi (2020) found in his research, where he showed that Rohingya refugees, rather than complete assimilation to the dominant language, preferred to maintain a balance through functional bilingualism. In contrast to the notion that language shift is unavoidable in a dominant language dependent environment (Alsahafi, 2019), this study shows that the participants successfully engaged themselves in a “reverse language shift” with the help of digital platforms. By doing so, they are actively engaged towards strengthening the ethnolinguistic vitality of their language.

6: Conclusion

6.1 Overall remark on the study

This study examined the lived experiences of the Rohingya female student population who are studying in an English-medium liberal arts university in Bangladesh. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the struggle between the maintenance of the students' heritage language and its loss, and the negotiation of their identities in an academic setting that was dominated by the English language. The study aimed to gain insights into the effects of long-term exposure to English on Rohingya female students' language practices, feelings of belonging, social status, and envisioned futures by conducting in-depth interviews with ten Rohingya female students. The results show the process of language and identity negotiation of the participants as being complex and multidimensional.

In terms of the first research question, which asked how Rohingya women experience the tensions of maintaining their heritage language in an English-dominant academic environment, the study revealed an increasing concern about the decline of the use of the Rohingya language in the educational and social context. Many of the participants reported forgetting vocabulary, difficulties maintaining fluency when communicating with family members, and not being at ease using their heritage language because of their limited knowledge of the written script of Rohingya. Meanwhile, they actively tried to maintain their language by communicating with other Rohingya pupils, family members and within digital environments. The results of this study indicate that the maintenance of a heritage language is not merely a matter of choice, but is significantly shaped by institutional, social and spatial circumstances.

Regarding the second research question, which asked how these women negotiate their identity, social positioning, and imagined futures as they invest in English, the results showed

that the participants experienced a dynamic process of negotiating identities, which involved both concealment and self-acceptance. A significant number of participants spoke of concealing their Rohingya identity and language as a way of not being stigmatized, discriminated against, or excluded. With time, however, some of them were able to positively redefine themselves by their exposure to higher education, confidence and supportive communities. The participants were beginning to see their Rohingya identity as a source of strength, resilience and responsibility rather than a burden. English became a twofold resource—serving as a source of worries over the loss of heritage language, and also as a channel for educational mobility, international engagement and expression, and the preservation of Rohingya history and culture.

The results also help to deepen the understanding and analysis of the theoretical frameworks on which this study was based. The notion of symbolic capital as put forward by Bourdieu (1991) explains the significance of English as a valuable resource through its attachment to education, mobility and professional opportunities. Participants' experiences of hiding their identities and language are at the same time a reflection of the presence of symbolic violence in unequal linguistic environments. Part of participants' investment in English for learning purposes was also to build the desired future identities as reflected in their willingness to invest in their acquisition of English. Moreover, the findings were congruent with Fishman's (1964) domain analysis as language maintenance was also high in the private domains, including dormitory, friendship, family communication, and digital communication, while the domain of English was institutional and academic.

In general, this study makes a significant contribution to the current literature within the field of language, identity and displacement as it is one of the least explored populations in a distinct educational setting. This research reported on the experiences of Rohingya female

students in an English-dominant higher education environment where they are engaged in the negotiation of heritage language maintenance and identity negotiation, a context that is different from the majority of previous studies that have mostly been conducted in refugee camps or families. It shows that heritage language loss and maintenance are not mutually exclusive phenomena, but rather co-occurring with the emergence of new identities, aspirations, and ways of cultural resilience.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. Firstly, although the small sample size is suitable for the phenomenological qualitative nature of the study, it limits the generalizability of the research as the findings may not be transferable to all Rohingya students of the same refugee background in other national contexts. Secondly, as the data heavily focused on students' perceptions, there is a possibility that their shared experiences have been overstated or understated by the participants. Thirdly, as the interviews were conducted in English, which is not the primary language of the participants, some nuances of their experiences may not have been fully captured.

6.3 Implications for Practice

This study can be helpful for similar organizations that have students from displaced backgrounds. Firstly, the findings suggest that institutional support is crucial for heritage language maintenance of displaced communities. Critically, heritage languages must be supported formally and also informally through different institution-led initiatives such as clubs, community events, language-focused workshops, etc., so that refugee students find a space to practice their language without fear. Secondly, university counselling services should be aware of the emotional burden of refugee students caused by the pressures of identity concealment and fear of judgment so that they can receive the necessary psychosocial support. Finally, Rohingya

students should be encouraged by the university to share their history of language, culture and displacement in English so that their peers from diverse backgrounds become more informed about the background of the Rohingya refugee community.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

Future research should be conducted to explore the perspectives of male Rohingya refugees on the maintenance of their heritage language and the negotiation of their identity in English-medium environments. Expanding the research base to include both male and female perspectives could also generate valuable insights for gender-comparative analyses. Moreover, as identity negotiation is a complex phenomenon, conducting a longitudinal study on the same population could be insightful to understand the students' changing experiences better over time. Additionally, as the findings point towards an increasing use of digital spaces for the preservation of heritage language and culture for Rohingya refugees, future research could be extended to explore the digital diaspora and understand how it functions as a distinct site for heritage language preservation for the Rohingya language. This exploration of the digital domain could also be extended to investigate similar heritage languages among refugee communities that have been displaced from their homelands and dispersed around the world. Finally, additional research examining the perspectives and influence of institutional stakeholders, such as teachers and other staff members, could provide valuable insights into how educational institutions shape the language learning experiences, identity negotiation, and sense of belonging of Rohingya students.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Rohingya female students in an English-medium higher education environment continuously negotiate between linguistic preservation and linguistic adaptation, as well as between identity concealment and identity affirmation.

Although English functions as a powerful form of symbolic capital that opens pathways to education, mobility, and advocacy, the participants did not view English acquisition as a replacement for their cultural identity. Instead, they actively sought ways to preserve their language, culture, and collective memory while investing in new opportunities. Their experiences reveal not only the challenges of displacement but also the resilience, agency, and determination with which they negotiate their identities and imagine their future identity. The findings therefore underscore the importance of creating educational environments that recognize and support both linguistic diversity and the lived realities of displaced students.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Section A: Heritage Language Maintenance

1. Describe how you use Rohingya language across different domains (family calls, community events, university classes) since you have come here.

a) How has English exposure worked as a catalyst in impacting your Rohingya usage in these domains?

b) What are some factors that strengthen the use of Rohingya? What are some factors that pose threat on its use?

2. What type of challenges did you face while maintaining Rohingya language in your university's English-dominant setting?

a) How do particular institutional factors such as peers, influence this?

b) What strategies help you continue maintaining Rohingya amidst the unfavorable circumstances?

3. Share your observation of how strong you find Rohingya language and community—here and back home?

a) What are some factors that gives it status or support?

b) If you observe low vitality, how do you personally feel about it?

4. In contrast to your family (parents/grandparents), describe your proficiency in Rohingya language. Also, how would you describe your connection with Rohingya language?

a) What are your fears about transmitting it to future generations?

b) What is the role of English language into this?

5. Explain your emotion and attachment towards Rohingya language.

- a) How motivated are you to preserve it, and why?
 - b) In what ways do you think you are experiencing subtle losses of Rohingya language?
6. Do you think it is important for you to preserve Rohingya language for your community's future identity?
- a) What important role did your language play for your community during the time of displacement? What role did it play after the displacement?
 - b) Do you think it's possible for Rohingya and English language to coexist? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Section B: Identity Negotiation

1. Describe how you perceive your Rohingya and English-speaking identities.
 - a) Which identity brings you more pride, and why?
 - b) Does English weaken or strengthen your Rohingya identity? In what ways?
2. Describe your comfort speaking Rohingya versus English here in this university.
 - a) Have any sort of power dynamics, such as stigma or bullying influenced the practice in positive or negative way?
 - b) Were there any instances where you had to hide your Rohingya speaking identity?
 - c) Were there any such instances when you felt alienated because of speaking in Rohingya?
3. Describe how you measure benefits of English (empowerment, mobility) against emotional attachment to Rohingya identity?
 - a) Have you experienced any conflict within your family/ community due to this tension?
 - b) Have you ever felt that you had to negotiate your identity? How?
4. What cultural elements feel deeply tied to Rohingya for you?

- a) Which language do you think defines your identity roots?
 - b) How does English reshape cultural belonging?
5. Imagine your identity in 10-15 years—what languages dominate, and why?
- a) What fears or hopes influence your choices?
6. Where do you invest more effort—Rohingya preservation or English competence?
- a) Which language do you prefer for your future generation, and why?
 - b) For anyone who is struggling to find an identity being in a similar situation, what advice would you like to give?

Appendix B

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Level	Areas of Study	Years in English-Dominant Environment
1	Amira	Undergraduate	STEM	4.5
2	Mong Swe	Pre-undergraduate	Not declared	4.5
3	Nimra	Undergraduate	STEM	4.5
4	Rahima	Undergraduate	STEM	4.5
5	Mina	Pre-undergraduate	Not declared	4.5
6	Jamira	Undergraduate	STEM	4.5
7	Rita	Postgraduate	Humanities	7
8	Hamida	Postgraduate	Humanities	7
9	Soe San	Undergraduate	STEM	5
10	Zaitun	Undergraduate	STEM	5

Note. Participants at the pre-undergraduate level had not yet declared an academic major.