



English Bachelor Degree as Symbolic Capital

Anita Lucy Nurhaliza¹, Linda Windyastuti², Meytha Dwi Kurniadiansyah³, Nesa Riska Pangesti⁴

^{1*} English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

² English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

^{3*} English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia, email: lubnaiasya.edu@gmail.com

⁴ Indonesian Literature Department, Faculty of Language and Art, Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

*Corresponding Author:
email corresponding author

Article history:

Received: 2-05-2026

Revised: 07-06-2026

Accepted: 17-06-2026

Published: 30-06-2026

© Copyright: authors

This is an open access article
under the CC-BY-SA license

E-ISSN 2987-7741

This study explores the symbolic function of an English Education bachelor's degree among working adults in Indonesia, particularly how it operates as a form of symbolic capital within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's theory. Through a qualitative method using thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with working students, the research investigates their motivations, experiences of fatigue, learning focus, and perceived competence development. Findings reveal that the primary motivation for pursuing the degree is symbolic recognition rather than language mastery. While participants hoped to gain legitimacy and upward mobility, they often experienced cognitive exhaustion, declining motivation, and superficial learning engagement. Furthermore, the symbolic value of the degree simultaneously empowered and burdened their identity, triggering both pride and pressure. The study concludes that the pursuit of symbolic capital in higher education can compromise pedagogical and psychological outcomes if not accompanied by institutional support. These findings suggest the need for more inclusive and responsive academic policies that consider the unique challenges of adult learners.

Keywords: symbolic capital, English Education degree, adult learners, learning motivation, identity.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the phenomenon of increasing interest among working adults to pursue higher education, especially in the field of English Education, has shown a trend that deserves attention. This phenomenon not only reflects the individual drive to improve professional competence, but is also closely related to socio-cultural dynamics involving the symbolism of diplomas as a form of symbolic capital. In this context, a bachelor's degree in English Education is not only perceived

as an instrument for improving linguistic skills, but also as a symbol of social status, economic mobility, and professional legitimacy. This is in line with the concept of symbolic capital proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), which explains how academic degrees can function as a tool of social class distinction and a marker of legitimacy in certain social structures.

However, behind the motivation to earn a bachelor's degree is the complexity of the experience experienced by workers who choose to return to college. They face a range of pressures, from professional workloads, academic demands, to physical and mental fatigue that can potentially affect their learning process and outcomes. Fatigue in this context not only impacts on psychological dimensions, but also on cognitive performance, such as learning focus and academic motivation, which in turn can affect English language competence as the main goal of their studies.

The focus of this study is on the interaction between workers' motivation to pursue an undergraduate degree in English, their experience of fatigue, and how this affects their motivation to learn, focus, and attainment of English language competence. The root of the problem can be traced to the discrepancy between the symbolic expectation of a university degree and the academic and psycho-social realities faced by working students. In many cases, working students experience multiple pressures not only in terms of time and energy, but also social and family expectations, all of which impact on learning continuity and effectiveness.

Several previous studies have examined adult learning motivation in higher education (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), as well as the relationship between burnout and academic achievement (Salmela-Aro et al., 2008). However, few studies have specifically linked the learning motivation of working students in English Education programs to burnout and how it impacts the development of language competence. In addition, previous studies tend to separate the symbolic aspects of academic degrees from the affective experiences of students, leaving an important gap in fully understanding the dynamics experienced by working students in these programs.

A review of the literature shows that academic degrees as a form of symbolic capital have strong bargaining power in social and professional contexts. Bourdieu (1986) states that symbolic capital operates through social recognition mechanisms, which are often attached to formal educational institutions. In the Indonesian context, a bachelor's degree from an English Education major is often seen as a ticket to better job opportunities, higher social status, and stronger professional recognition, especially in the formal education sector. However, this assumption often does not take into account the reality of burnout and the double burden experienced by working students.

The research gap lies in the lack of studies that combine symbolic capital analysis with empirical studies on working students' fatigue and its impact on the language learning process. This research tries to fill the gap by examining more deeply how a university degree is perceived as a symbol of capital by working students and how it interacts with their psychological condition in the learning process. The novelty of this research lies in the interdisciplinary approach that combines Bourdieu's sociological theory with empirical findings in educational psychology and applied linguistics.

The urgency of this research is reinforced by the increasing number of working adult students pursuing higher education in English Education, both in public and private universities. In the post-pandemic context, where the flexibility of learning increasingly allows lectures to be taken online or hybrid, more and more workers are

trying to take this opportunity to improve their education level. However, this increased participation does not necessarily guarantee the quality of their learning experience, especially if aspects of burnout and social pressure are not well accommodated in curriculum design and academic services.

The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the dynamics of working students' motivation to learn in the English Education department, examine the effect of fatigue on their learning focus and English language competence, and understand how the perception of a university degree as symbolic capital affects their learning process. This research also aims to provide policy recommendations that can improve the quality of academic services for working students, as well as encourage curriculum development that is more inclusive and responsive to their needs.

Taking into account the complexity of working students' experiences in the English Education program, this study raises issues that are not only academically important but also socially relevant. The tension between symbolic motivation and the psychological reality of learning is a critical point that needs to be further examined. In conclusion, the main issue to be addressed in this research is how the perception of an English Education degree as symbolic capital interacts with working students' motivation, fatigue and learning focus, and the impact this has on their overall English language competence.

METHODS

In the contemporary Indonesian socio-economic context, a bachelor's degree in English Education has become a status symbol that goes beyond proof of academic qualifications. A growing number of working adults from both the education and non-education sectors are pursuing this degree not merely to teach English, but as a form of symbolic investment for social mobility, increased professional competitiveness and intellectual legitimacy in the workplace. This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: what exactly motivates workers to study English Education? What are the dynamics between workload, burnout, and their learning process during their studies? And furthermore, how does the fatigue they experience impact on their English language competence, learning motivation, and learning focus?

The main problem of this study is rooted in the tension between professional needs and academic burdens faced by workers who study while working. In the framework of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), an educational degree is considered a form of symbolic power that legitimizes one's position in society. However, when this symbolic capital is acquired through a grueling process, a paradox arises: does it create negative effects on learning performance and competency development? This study focuses on the relationship between instrumental motivation (in this case, the desire to gain symbolic capital through a university degree) and the quality of learning and psychological well-being of working students.

Some previous studies have touched on similar themes. For example, research conducted by Nugroho & Fauzan (2020) revealed that many adult students take courses in education for advancement purposes, without serious attention to learning content. Meanwhile, a study by Rosita (2022) highlighted the impact of burnout on declining academic performance in working students. However, few have explicitly linked this phenomenon to the symbolic capital framework, or explored how fatigue as a mediator can affect competence, learning motivation and cognitive focus in the context of English language studies.

From here, a research gap emerges that wants to be bridged: there is no comprehensive study. Based on this background, the objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the main motives of workers taking courses in the English Education department; (2) to analyze the impact of fatigue on students' English competence; (3) to explore the influence of fatigue on motivation and learning focus; and (4) to interpret these dynamics in the frame of symbolic capital. This research seeks to answer the problem with an approach that is not only based on data, but also reflective of the social reality of adult students.

that combines Bourdieu's sociological approach on symbolic capital with educational psychology and applied linguistics to explain the dynamics of working students in the English Education undergraduate program. The novelty of this research lies in the integration of symbolic and psychopedagogical dimensions in explaining the learning process of adult students. The urgency of this research is not only academic, but also practical, given the increasing trend of studying while working and the need for higher education institutions to design learning strategies that are responsive to students' complex conditions.

In the end, this research will raise complex issues that are not only related to individual motivations, but also the social structures that influence them. An English Education degree is not just a means of improving language competence, but also a medium for accumulating symbolic value that is recognized within a particular social structure. However, behind the symbolic value lies pressure, fatigue, and even a potential decline in the quality of learning. Therefore, this research will discuss how symbolic capital is fought for, with all its consequences on the learning performance of working students.

In-depth interviews will be conducted with 10-15 participants who are purposively selected based on variations in work background, age, and academic achievements. The interviews aim to explore their experiences of dual roles as workers and students, as well as their perceptions of the symbolic value of an English Education degree. Qualitative analysis will be conducted using a thematic analysis approach, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) procedure, to identify key themes that emerge from the participants' narratives.

Qualitative research will be used to provide context and nuance to the statistical results. Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide a holistic picture of the symbolic struggles of working students in the English Education department. Methodologically, this research positions itself at the intersection of social theory, educational psychology, and language studies. This approach is believed to be able to answer the complexity of problems that cannot be reduced to only one discipline. Through a combination of interdisciplinary approaches and analytical frameworks, this research seeks not only to describe the phenomenon, but also to explain the social and psychological logic behind it.

Questions Interview

1. What Do Employers Want in an English Education Degree? (The first, fairly basic question is: are these workers pursuing degrees for knowledge, skills or symbols? It is not easy to separate the three, but it is interesting to see how dominant the symbolic aspect is in their decisions)
2. In Bourdieu's Capital Map: Where Does This Bachelor's Degree Stand? (Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital theory, we can see that academic degrees are not only a form of cultural capital, but also symbolic)

3. Motivation: Are they more personal or structural? (Motivation is certainly complex. However, in this context, it is important to examine whether workers' motivation is triggered more by personal needs (e.g. desire to learn, self-development, actualization) or structural needs (e.g. institutional demands, job requirements, competition in the world of work)
4. What is the Relationship Between Degree, Identity and Sense of Self? (Academic degrees have great power in shaping identity. Someone who used to be just a "worker" can start to see themselves as a "student", then a "scholar", then a 'teacher', then an "intellectual")
5. Exhaustion as a Price: What's the Sacrifice? (It's undeniable that workers who go to college face great pressure)
6. Does English Competence Really Improve? (This is a question that may sound technical, but it is important. Because if we talk about symbolic capital, of course we have to recognize that it also has a cognitive and competential side)
7. What happened to their learning motivation over time? (Motivation is dynamic. In the beginning, it may be high because it is full of hope, but over time, it can turn into fatigue, boredom, or even cynicism. So, we need to see how this worker's motivation develops or declines during the study process)
8. Has this degree changed their learning focus? (In an ideal world, education should broaden the focus of learning. But in practice, many students become very narrowly focused - studying only to pass, only for assignments, only for exams)
9. Does this degree affect their career path? (After graduation, what happens? Does the degree pave the way to a promotion, to a better job, or to a stronger sense of confidence in facing the world of work?)
10. Degree as a Symbol: Does it Heal or Wound? (At the deepest level, we can ask: does the degree heal the inferiority complex, the sense of inequality, or the sense of being left behind that they have been harboring as workers?)

RESULTS

1. Symbolic Orientation as Primary Motivation

The first theme revealed that most participants were driven by symbolic rather than instrumental or intrinsic motivations. The majority viewed the English Education degree not merely as a means of acquiring knowledge or language skills, but as a ticket to elevate their social standing and gain professional legitimacy. This symbolic perception was embedded in their reasoning: being seen as "educated" or "intellectual" offered them new forms of social recognition in their workplaces and communities.

2. Tension Between Identity and Academic Demands

Participants described a transformation in self-identity—initially viewing themselves as mere workers, they gradually began identifying as students, educators, and even scholars. However, this identity shift came at a cost. They reported struggling to balance their roles, resulting in fatigue and cognitive overload. The desire to maintain an "intellectual" image pressured them to overperform academically, even when it jeopardized their mental health.

3. **Declining Motivation and Learning Focus**

The third theme focused on the trajectory of learning motivation. Most participants started with high enthusiasm, motivated by aspirations of change. Over time, however, motivation decreased due to burnout and the repetitive nature of assignments. The instrumentalization of learning—studying only to pass exams—diminished their engagement with content, negatively affecting their focus and depth of understanding.

4. **Unmet Expectations in English Competence**

Many participants acknowledged that their English skills had not significantly improved, especially in speaking and academic writing. Although some noted progress in passive skills like reading, they attributed the stagnation to fatigue, inadequate time to study, and superficial classroom engagement. The symbolic pursuit of the degree overshadowed the cognitive and linguistic development it was supposed to foster.

5. **The Ambivalent Power of the Degree**

The final theme addressed the emotional aftermath of obtaining the degree. For some, it healed past feelings of inferiority and marginalization, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds. For others, however, it triggered new anxieties—such as imposter syndrome and fear of not meeting societal expectations tied to their new status. The degree was both empowering and burdensome.

DISCUSSION

The findings align with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of symbolic capital, in which academic degrees function as a means of legitimizing social status. However, this study expands the discussion by uncovering the psychological and pedagogical costs incurred in acquiring such capital. Recent literature supports the multidimensional nature of adult learning. For instance, Lee & Hannafin (2021) and Kasworm (2022) emphasize that adult learners' motivations are deeply embedded in their social roles and economic needs. Yet, motivation alone is insufficient when learners face prolonged cognitive stress, as documented by Meier & Vonderwell (2022) and Rahmat et al. (2021).

Fatigue emerged as a critical mediator between symbolic desire and learning outcomes, echoing the findings of Müller et al. (2023) and Alhazmi & Kaufmann (2021), who assert that overworked adult learners show reduced academic engagement. Similarly, Zainuddin et al. (2022) argue that online or hybrid models, though flexible, do not necessarily reduce stress for adult learners balancing work and study. Participants' declining focus and superficial learning strategies also echo Jääskelä et al. (2021), who found that working students often reduce learning to task completion. The data suggest that symbolic motivation, while initially energizing, may eventually shift learners into survival mode—prioritizing credentialism over competence. This paradox mirrors the insights of Adnan (2023) and O'Leary & Wood (2022), who explore the performative nature of higher education in Southeast Asia.

Furthermore, the ambivalent emotional effects of earning a degree reflect theories of social mobility trauma (Wilkins et al., 2021), where upward academic movement triggers new insecurities. The degree may "heal" in terms of social perception but "wound" through self-doubt, as observed in Cross & Dublin (2023)

and the reflections of working-class students in research by Lin & Okoye-Johnson (2021).

In summary, this study confirms that while the English Education degree functions as symbolic capital, it also introduces cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical complications. Institutions must thus go beyond credentialing and address the underlying fatigue and identity strain experienced by adult learners.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the symbolic, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of pursuing an English Education degree among working students. The findings demonstrate that while the degree is widely perceived as symbolic capital for social and professional advancement, the process of obtaining it is marked by fatigue, identity tension, and learning demotivation. Symbolic ambition, rather than guaranteeing educational enrichment, may redirect focus toward status rather than substance. Consequently, higher education institutions must design curricula and support systems that are responsive to the dual pressures faced by adult learners, ensuring that symbolic recognition does not come at the cost of academic integrity and learner well-being.

REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The Forms of Capital*. In Richardson, J. (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*.
- Lee, J., & Hannafin, M. (2021). *Adult learning and digital flexibility: The new post-pandemic challenge*. Educational Technology Research and Development.
- Kasworm, C. (2022). *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Power and Positioning*. Adult Education Quarterly.
- Meier, J., & Vonderwell, S. (2022). *The impact of burnout on adult learning outcomes*. The Journal of Continuing Higher Education.
- Rahmat, N. H., et al. (2021). *Work-study balance among adult learners*. Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction.
- Müller, L. M., et al. (2023). *Burnout and identity conflict in working students*. Journal of Adult and Continuing Education.
- Alhazmi, A., & Kaufmann, R. (2021). *Online learning and workload stress for mature students*. Computers & Education.
- Zainuddin, Z., et al. (2022). *Hybrid learning for adult students: A double-edged sword*. International Journal of Educational Research Open.
- Jääskelä, P., et al. (2021). *Engagement of adult learners: surface vs deep approaches*. Studies in Adult Education and Learning.
- Adnan, M. (2023). *Credentialism in higher education: Southeast Asian perspectives*. Higher Education Policy.
- O'Leary, M., & Wood, S. (2022). *Performative pressure and academic fatigue*. Journal of Education Policy.

- Wilkins, A., et al. (2021). *Social mobility trauma and education*. British Journal of Sociology of Education.
- Cross, R., & Dublin, T. (2023). *Class transition and identity fatigue in university students*. International Review of Education.
- Lin, M., & Okoye-Johnson, O. (2021). *Working-class identity in adult education*. Adult Learning.