

English Language in Bangladesh: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

Global literacy skills, namely proficiency in English and technology, have affected globalization, which has profoundly impacted the political, socio-economic and cultural dimensions of our society. In response to changes brought about by globalization, all countries are attempting to ensure the adequate equipment of global literacy skills. Nowadays, English has become the de facto lingua franca of international communication and a much sought-after commodity. In Bangladesh, English is the language of the educated elite and not commonly used in daily interactions. Now, Bangladesh is faced with the grim reality of lagging behind neighbouring countries which are moving ahead in terms of access to the world market. This study aims to address the current understanding of English language education policy and scenario in Bangladesh. The findings reveal that though CLT based English language curriculum has been operating in the secondary level in Bangladesh in 1996 and revised again in 2012, most teachers are not familiar with CLT guidelines and CLT related activities. Besides this, there are some crucial factors which demand great attention in order to change the current scenario. As a result, there are inconsistencies between the stated objectives of Teaching English and the actual teaching techniques.

Key Words: Lingua Franca, Teaching English, Teaching Techniques, Crucial Factors, EFL, ESL.

Introduction

English is learned as a foreign or second language in Bangladesh. In EFL/ESL condition, the learners of Bangladesh are taught English within the classroom, but they communicate with each other in Bangla outside. English is mostly learned in a traditional way, i.e. based on grammatical translation method in an exam-oriented manner. Sometimes, students only learn how

to communicate in everyday situations in order to communicate with native speakers if they enter an English-speaking environment. They are encouraged to learn the general English as they need to take part in social life. English in non-EFL/ESL situations is considered a non-essential, “secondary language” (Catford 1965) in the society since in EFL/ESL situations the learners are in demand to adopt the English language in the class as well as for many academic and official purposes outside the class.

Language plays an important role in the negotiation of power and relationship at the interpersonal, social and the global level as well. By the end of the twentieth century, English was well on its way to become a lingua franca, widely used for international communication among the people who do not speak this language and have English as a second or third language. English is truly a global language due to a number of factors which have ensured the widespread use of English, such as - colonial history, economics, information exchange, travel and popular culture (Harmer 14 - 15). Basically, Bangladesh is a monolingual country. Now, its education policy and curriculum mandate make English as compulsory second language for its global nature. For the last two decades, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has been introduced in teaching and learning English in Bangladesh. According to linguists, CLT is one of the best approaches to second and foreign language learning. Though CLT has been implemented in the education system of Bangladesh, it remains unsuccessful. There are enormous challenges in Bangladesh for both learners and teachers in gaining proficiency in English: irregular use of English, words borrowed from another language, and the consequentially different phonological representation (Rashed 2012). The following section presents the realities of and the common challenges to the learning of English in Bangladesh.

Challenges Common English as a Language in Bangladesh:

The following are some of the crucial factors which demand great attention in order to change the current scenario in Bangladesh.

The Absence of Ideal Class

As mentioned already, there are more than 50 students in a class and 35/40 minutes class time for each class. It is very difficult for the teachers to teach properly. There are many problems

in the classroom like- old-fashioned furniture - benches and desks which restrict movement, broken blackboard; noise from other classes, lack of aids of all kinds, interference or dominating attitude of parents, conservative headmasters and finally the lack of an effective assessment system which prevent productive learning and teaching of English. These problems can be tackled if the premium is placed on an ideal classroom, having all kinds of aids, effective materials, class work, homework, assignment, presentations, group work and above all, an encouragement of positive attitude of the teachers, parents and students alike.

Materials

NCTB (National Curriculum & Textbook Board) provides materials up to class XII to teachers to use for teaching. However, teachers have to cope with unforeseen problems because a class is composed of different levels of students: they are different in attitude, aptitude, intelligence, maturity, and age. Tony Writes (1987) describes four different learning styles in a group. According to him, the ‘enthusiast’ gives importance to the teachers in the classrooms. The classrooms are centered on teachers and are concerned with the goals of all members of the learning group, not just personal. The ‘oracular’ also focuses on the teachers but gives more importance to the satisfaction of personal goals. The ‘participator’ tends to concentrate on the group goals and group solidarity, whereas the ‘rebel’ is merely concerned with the satisfaction of his or her own goals (as cited in Harmer 88).

Keith Willing (1987) while working with adult students in Australia, suggested four learner categories:

1. Converges: These students are by nature solitary and prefers to avoid groups. They like to be independent of their abilities.
2. Conformists: These students prefer language learning and its use. They are happy to work in non-communicative classrooms.
3. Concrete Learners: They also enjoy the social aspects of learning and like to learn from direct experience.

4. Communicative learners: These students are language-usage oriented. They are much more interested in social interaction with other speakers of the language than the analysis of how the language works technically (as cited in Harmer 88).

Demands of Learners

Learners are different, so are their demands. Thus, the same materials are not compatible with all; nevertheless, the teachers use the same materials in the class. Most of the textbooks do not contain tasks from which learners can draw samples from the local, everyday experience. The English textbooks need improvement in the selection and gradation of vocabulary, good printing, suitable subject matter, language and style, exercises and glossary as well as relevance of English stories to suit the culture and tradition.

The Absence of Trained Teachers

Teachers have an important role in teaching. Sometimes teachers are democratic and sometimes autocratic. Teachers are called upon to play different roles in language teaching classrooms. According to Harmer (2007), in the language learning classroom, a teacher needs to replicate the situation as closely as possible and then provide sufficient support to learners, to be a controller, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, feedback provider so as to identify the students' problems and should be able to switch between these roles (108-111). The teacher has to apply it when it is appropriate to use one or another of these roles.

Harmer also says that if we summarize the role of a teacher, it would be as follows:
Engage -> instruct (demonstrate) -> initiate -> organize feedback. (112)

Bangladesh Situation

In Bangladesh, most teachers of English at the secondary level are qualified in terms of credentials and training but do not have a strong background in English. Teachers give mere feedback underlining the mistakes and errors, but hardly provide any constructive comments for correct writing. Teachers are also traditionally preoccupied mostly with a dominant sense of grammatical accuracy rather than the development of ideas.

Since the Independence of Bangladesh, many policies regarding the teaching and learning of English have changed time and again. According to Education Expert Committee Report (2002), since 1991 it has been trying to improve the quality of English language teaching in Bangladesh. But even after learning English for 13 to 15 years, the students of Bangladesh cannot communicate in English. This is because teachers at the primary and secondary level are not competent in the four language skills and that is why they do not use English as a medium of instruction in English classes. They just give importance to grammar rules and do not encourage their students to participate in any kind of pair work or group discussion.

Monolingual Country

In the Indian subcontinent, the use of English commenced with the establishment of British colonialism more than 200 years ago. At the initial stage, the reasons behind using English were linked with business among the people of different linguistic backgrounds. With the development of business and communication, the demand for English rapidly grew and it gradually became the medium of communication in the field of education, administration, politics, and so on. This declaration immensely influenced the educational institutions like colleges, madrasahs, universities and so forth. English was firmly established as the academic and the official language of India from the beginning of the twentieth century.

Haque (2008) remarks that after the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, English continued to play a very important role in multilingual West and East Pakistan. The language movement for the status of Bangla language infused a strong feeling of linguistic nationalism among Bengalis. In the end, the government had to accept Bangla as one of the official languages. Despite such a scenario, English retained the same power and position in the field of education, administration and politics in West and East Pakistan from 1947 to 1971. During this period, English was taught as a second language (26).

After the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the position of English seriously suffered because of the strong nationalistic sentiment for the Bangla language. Bangla was given the status of official language and made the medium of instruction in 1972. Because of the government's

declaration, Bangla got constitutional recognition and began to be used in almost every sector of national life; at the same time, English came to be treated as a foreign language. One problem for the national language policy is the mindset of people - there is a sentiment for Bangla because of life sacrifices in 1952 and its crucial role in the Independence of the country in 1971. Learning English is considered as an antagonistic activity, and not complementary, also because of the British colonialism of two centuries. This is the result of the colonial traditional with its prolonged usage of English as a tool of divide and rule policy. Even now, English is being taught as a foreign language at different levels of education. This makes language planning a highly complex and emotional issue.

Colonial Mindset

The colonial legacy continues in the field of education. The colonial mindset has made the people dependent on other countries and agencies. The colonized people feel that the ideas and materials of the colonial country are innovative, and that the colonizers are the best policy makers in the field of education. All the committees and commissions have tried to adopt and adapt to the colonial model. It is very culturally-biased. Therefore, the students of Bangladesh suffer: sometimes they cannot match with these adapted models and they do not feel interested in learning the English language.

Political Compulsion

In the age of globalization, English has become a means of power and exploitation (Haque 5). As a result, there is no proper planning at the political level for coordination among various agencies like the government, the policy makers, planners, and the universities in the implementation of suitable policies.

In 1988, the Bangladesh National Education Commission Report gave a frustrating picture of proficiency in English among learners- it found that, majority of the students are not achieving a satisfactory level of proficiency in English. Until 1980, English was taught as a compulsory subject in BA Honours' and BA Pass Course, but it was discontinued from 1981 onwards.

However, in 1992, the Bangladesh Government passed an act to reintroduce English as a compulsory subject for all BA Honours' and BA Pass Course students.

The first public university, The University of Dhaka, was introduced in Bangladesh in 1921. According to the website of UGC (2011), there are 31 public and 54 private universities in Bangladesh. Almost 70% students in tertiary education study in public universities; however, the universities seem to have lost their appeal because of students' politics, political influence, session jam and the mismanagement on the part of the authorities.

Imported Methods

Imported methods of teaching are being used in Bangladesh. Most of these methods have been developed in native speaking countries like the United Kingdom or the United States of America. However, they are proving to be ineffective in ESL or EFL context. The popular methodologies of English language teaching are GTM (Grammar Translation Method), Direct Method, Audiolingualism, PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production), CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), TBL (Task-Based Learning) and so on.

Most of these methodologies are not suitable in this country because of a number of factors, namely- non-availability of ideal classes, an absence of trained teachers, lack of infrastructure and other facilities, socioeconomic factors, etc. Some other factors are also involved, such as students' personality, maturity, proficiency level, and age. Because of all these different aspects, most of the methodologies are inappropriate for the students.

As Pennycook (1998) observes "We need to see English Language Teaching located in the domain of popular culture as much as in the domain of applied linguistics. Our attitudes to the language and to the way it is taught reflect cultural biases and beliefs about how we should communicate and how we should educate each other" (as cited in Harmer 77).

Harmer (2007) also comments that context-sensitive teachers try to create a bridge between their methodology beliefs and the students' preferences (77).

The language professionals in Bangladesh have not yet developed appropriate methods and techniques for teaching English based on local wisdom and classroom experience.

Examination-Oriented Teaching Pattern

The examination-oriented teaching patterns do not have any practical impact upon the learners, for various reasons (Jayanthi 293). Teachers complete the syllabus in a hurry and they have the impression that everything has been covered. After that, the students prepare and answer the examination. The comprehension questions also do not help the learners to critically analyze the text.

The questions of the secondary level examination include multiple choice questions from the passage, dialogue writing, narration, summarizing, filling in the gaps for a vocabulary test, re-arranging, paragraph writing, letter writing, etc. For English first paper and second paper examination, students need to answer grammar-based questions to measure their grammar and language proficiency.

Comprehension type questions are too easy because the answer can be lifted directly from the text with no real understanding; the subject matter is inappropriate for learners of this age and intellectual level, the dialogue is too formal and not the representation of everyday speech. They also try to memorize the dialogue because they are not taught the negative effects of memorization.

The present examination type is based on memorization and reproduction. It does not test the competence of the learners' ability. English proficiency is measured only through written examination. It is equally important to review the speaking and listening skills. If students develop their speaking, listening and reading skills, they will be able to use the language properly. However, very few steps have been taken to resolve these problems and establish the aims of teaching English through proper assessment.

Lack of Infrastructure and Facilities

The infrastructure of the typical classroom is poor. Many schools do not have enough pieces of furniture to accommodate all learners. Majority of the schools are not well-equipped with teaching aids. They do not have simple visual aids such as- charts, good blackboard, pictures, etc. The non-availability of the right type of teaching materials and audio-visual aids like a tape recorder, sound system, and filmstrip etc. make teaching of English ineffective. Teachers also fail to make the language classes lively and interactive.

Socio-economic Factors

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world with more than 160 million people. She is a developing country. Her per capita income in 2014 was estimated to be US \$ 1190 per year and the latest literary survey report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BSS), the country's literacy rate is 61.5 % (Chowdhury and Kabir 4). These figures represent huge challenges involved in continuing to provide universal education, especially in rural areas where the dropout rate in schools is skyrocketing. As Said (1978) observes, developing countries continue to struggle with poverty, financial crisis, internal strife, dissent and movement for autonomy, natural disasters and cultural hegemony on the part of former colonial countries (13). Being a developing country, Bangladesh is also struggling to cope with these challenges. Literacy plays an important role in these conditions. The issues of social and educational interest are related to economic growth. In education, schools, as well as teachers, are facing challenges in trying to shape the students into global citizens. However, this scenario is changing fast due to the initiatives taken by the government in recent years.

Unsuccessful Implementation of CLT

According to Nunan (1992), CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) is the most suitable approach to second and foreign language learning in Bangladesh. This approach is real situation based, for the reason that learners can learn the language through social interaction with each other and it makes them socially and linguistically competent.

CLT was first introduced at the secondary level and the textbook “English for Today” was revised according to CLT format. It was also implemented at the higher secondary level education in 2001.

Though CLT was put into action in the Bangladeshi education system, it remains unsuccessful as per the reports from local ELT practitioners (Hamid and Baldauf 16). It is because of the lack of trained teachers. They cannot follow CLT properly and have little opportunity to develop and update their linguistic and teaching skills. Teachers at the primary and secondary level are less competent in the four English language skills and that is why they do not use the English language as a medium of instruction for English classes.

There are other noticeable matters as well. The teachers are confused about the constituents of communicative activities in the classroom. There are also some constraints that make CLT ineffective in Bangladesh. These are - poor knowledge of vocabulary, reluctant usage of English both inside and outside of the classroom, non-cooperation of the learners, economic constraints, classroom size, administrative setup, intra-structural limitations and cultural conflicts.

The way in which English is taught and learned in Bangladesh remains dissatisfactory to all. The low standard of English in the country has always been a matter of concern to all language learners and teachers. The progress is remarkable in terms of economy and education since the birth of the country. The people of Bangladesh can improve their English teaching and learning situation too.

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