

## English in Bangladesh's Education System: A Critical Analysis of Policies, Practices and Current Status

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### Abstract

This article explores a comprehensive analysis of the place of English in the education system of Bangladesh following the development of language policies and practices from the nation's independence in 1971 to the present. The integration of English language instruction at the elementary, secondary, higher secondary and tertiary levels is examined in relation to the historical background, constitutional framework and government activities. It examines the difficulties and achievements in putting English education policy into practice, with an emphasis on curriculum development, teacher training and assessment techniques and the medium of instruction. The article provides insights into the continuous attempts to strike a balance between tradition and modernity by critically assessing the current status of English in the education system. Additionally, it makes suggestions for improving English language instruction to meet global standards while maintaining nation's cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Education system, English education, globalization, language policy and medium of instruction

### 1. Introduction

The educational system of Bangladesh has relied heavily on English since gaining independence in 1971. Historical, sociopolitical and economic aspects have all had an impact on the integration of English language instruction. There is ongoing discussion and change over the place of English in Bangladesh's educational system. Bangladesh acquired English as a language of administration

and education from its time as a British colony. Eventually, the status of English in the academic landscape of the nation has been shaped over the years by a number of policies and practices. This article explores how English education policies have changed over time, how they are being implemented and the state of education in Bangladesh today.

## **2. Historical Context and Policies**

Bangla was first given priority as the official language of English after gaining independence in order to promote unity and sense of national identity. However, the government reinstated English as a required subject at all levels, from basic to tertiary, acknowledging its relevance on a worldwide scale. The National Education policy marked a dramatic change in teaching methods by prioritizing communicative competence above rote memorization.

## **3. Language Policy of Bangladesh**

### **3.1 The Constitutional Framework**

Article 3 of the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh explicitly stipulated the adoption of Bengali as the official language of the state. Bangla was gradually developed as the nation's identity (Rasheed, 2012). As per the Ministry of Education's Statistics (2006), Bangla was to be used as the medium of instruction in the education system and also in government and semi-government agencies of Bangladesh (Thomason, 2000). In 1987, "the Bengali Language Introduction Act" was also approved with the vision to strengthen the earlier directives. Such initiatives aiming to push Bangla had a major impact on English since English was replaced by Bangla in various domains. English and Bangla were based on "zero-sum relationship" which means that the promotion of one will result in the demotion of the other (Hasan, 2011). Though there was nothing mentioned regarding English as a language in the constitution, still, it was re-emphasised that learning English was vital because the ideal jobs demanded good command of English to provide effective communication of ideas and opinions (Funk, 2014). Eventually, the Constitution of Bangladesh (1956) followed the principle of language policy under which it was mentioned that Urdu and Bengali would be the state languages. It also stated that English would be continued for the span of 20 years from the day of the constitution. This all happened when Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan.

### 3.2 Government Policies

Bangladesh established a number of educational bodies during the post-independence time. Bangladesh was able to develop its existing education system with the help of measures taken by these educational bodies. In fact, the Education Commission of Bangladesh laid down a strategic policy framework to enhance the existing education system. The reconstruction of the national policy was done to support the existing efforts toward enhancing the status of English in Bangladesh.

At the universities in Bangladesh, different foreign languages were taught. However, English was retained at primary, secondary, higher secondary and college levels as the obligatory foreign language subject (Basak, 2014). The current status of English at that time and the policy-making regarding the same were the results of the “Language Movement of 1952” and the “Legislative Action of 1971”. A major emphasis was put on Bengali as a language in all spheres in the framework of language policies of Bangladesh with the “Language Act of 1988”. This, in turn, influenced the Bangladeshi way of life for the cultural use of English. Domains like government, education, legal press etc. clearly followed the above-mentioned policy framework where Bengali replaced English (Banu & Sussex, 2001). In 1976, different English language taskforces were established by the Ministry of Education in order to review the position of English in Bangladesh. Further, recommendations for enhancing the position of English in Bangladesh were rendered. It was also reported that the level of English of the students at the secondary level was not aligned with the expectations based on their textbooks. Therefore, in 1990, the government decided to introduce English as a compulsory subject from the very first schooling year.

An act to introduce English at the university level was passed by the government in 1992. Also, new syllabi and new books were published with a change in the level of English context for all ten years of schooling. Post-1993, English was introduced in courses at the university level pertaining to 100 marks each semester. The objective behind these efforts was to enhance the deteriorating academic standards and improve the employability prospects of the nation’s citizens. As identified by the University Grants Commission along with the British Council that teachers were somehow the core reason responsible for the restricted development of the English Language. Hence, the

“English Language Teaching Improvement Project” (ELTIP) was introduced by the Bangladeshi Government (Robson, 2013). This initiative was undertaken in cooperation with the “International Development Department”. The main aim of the project was to provide service training to the teachers and also support in building the study material for the learners.

Though there were a number of policies introduced under the “National Education Policy” (2000) regarding the use of English as the medium of teaching, also introducing English as a mandatory subject till the 3<sup>rd</sup> Standard but no clear, definite and well-coordinated efforts were taken to develop a framework addressing the language issue in the country. As a result of the Act passed in 1992, it was made mandatory to teach English at the college level of education. While talking about the English language policy in Bangla-medium schools including both private and public sectors, Sultana (2012) mentioned, *“English as a language has sometimes encouraged, sometimes it has been confined and sometimes forbidden”. This was stated based on the statistics of about 3% of the population uses English as the second language”*.

During an investigation of the existing policies in Bangladesh from 1971 to 1981, Akteruzzaman and Islam (2017) found a discrepancy between the policy objectives and their application. The major reason behind this was accounted for socio-political context addressing educational policies. In the era of Premier Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, it was noted that all funding of the schools at the primary and secondary level was given to the government which was earlier run by the private sector. It was a declared commitment from the government’s end to provide the facility of education to the mass and the policies framed aimed at equal learning opportunities for all. Even though the national policies favoured Bangla as the national language, the elite class continued to follow English-medium education for their children (Banu & Sussex, 2001). To retain the interests of the elite class and their concern with the language issues, the “Private University Act” was approved that offered English-medium education in the private universities of Bangladesh (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016).

In a study conducted by Graddol (2010), it was observed that countries across the world were aiming at upgrading the skill development of their workforce to attain an edge in the global market. Chatterjee (2015) emphasised the necessity of maintaining English proficiency to meet targets and sustain competitiveness in the global market. It was also needed to communicate efficiently with

the experts if they were not to be left out in the globalisation process. Since the global language was English, therefore it was needed to be fluent in English as bad English could restrict them from competing in international markets (Hamid, 2009). The significant status of English in the national curriculum of the regions underlying India, those that were once a part of it, was an outcome of the British Raj for so many years. The British during their rule emphasised the establishment of English as a mandatory subject by including English in the syllabus and the teaching in India during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Graddol, 2010).

**Table 1: Timeline of English and English Education Policy in Bangladesh**

Year	Policy/Commission	Key Provisions on English and English Education
1974	Bangladesh Education Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English prioritized as a foreign language, to be introduced from Class 6.</li> <li>General emphasis on English language learning.</li> </ul>
1976	English Teaching Taskforce Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English to be introduced from either Class 3 or Class 6, depending on teacher availability.</li> </ul>
1988	Bangladesh National Education Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Class 3 recommended as the starting point for English education.</li> <li>Class 6 proposed as a uniform starting point for English education across schools.</li> </ul>
1991	National Curriculum Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English introduced from Class 3.- English made a compulsory subject from Class 1 (from 1992).</li> </ul>
2000	National Education Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English designated as the medium of instruction for kindergarten.</li> <li>Curriculum and materials translated into English for kindergarten.</li> <li>English introduced as an additional subject in Classes 1 and 2, becoming compulsory from Class 3.</li> <li>English allowed as a medium of instruction alongside Bengali from the secondary level (Class 7).</li> <li>Emphasis on English as the medium of instruction at the tertiary level.</li> </ul>
2003	National Education Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reemphasis on early English education starting from the primary level.</li> <li>Primary education aimed to equip learners with English language skills as a foreign language.</li> <li>Focus on revising and improving the English curriculum.</li> <li>Proposal for foreign training for trainers (PTI and NAPE) and local training for all secondary school teachers to enhance English teaching.</li> <li>Introduction of a six-month English language course at the tertiary level.</li> </ul>
2010	National Education Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English recognized as essential for developing a knowledge-based society.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on English writing and speaking from the start of primary education.</li> <li>• English made compulsory across all educational streams from the secondary level.</li> <li>• Option to introduce English as a medium of instruction from secondary level onwards.</li> <li>• Priority on recruiting a sufficient number of qualified English teachers at the secondary level.</li> <li>• English mandated as a compulsory subject in all colleges and universities.</li> <li>• English (alongside Bengali) established as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level.</li> <li>• Encouragement to translate key books from English to Bengali for broader accessibility.</li> </ul>
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*(Adapted from Chowdhury and Kabir, 2014)*

#### 4. Current Status of English in the Bangladesh Educational System

Bangladesh is an independent nation carrying the heritage of India as well as Pakistan. Both nations have played a major role in influencing the present scenario of the education system in Bangladesh. The earlier system of education was framed during the British era in India and consolidated at the time of Pakistan. Between the years 1947 and 1972, the field of education did not witness any substantial or revolutionary ideas, as stated by Rajput (2015).

Bangladesh became a sovereign state having radical changes in the fields of socio-politics and economic philosophy. These changes arose due to dissatisfaction with the existing system of education under the Pakistan government. With the achievement of independence, the country got a chance to reconstruct its society and bring changes aligned with the socio-political and economic philosophy of the country. The founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, suggested that these education policies under the socio-political system and economic philosophy would play a major role in the development of the country (Rasheed, 2012). The introduction of new methods and approaches of English Language Teaching (ELT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Bangladesh faced strong opposition from the traditional English teachers who were resistant to change and reluctant to adopt these novel approaches aimed at teaching English to non-native speakers. Another underlying reason for the resistance was that they believed in British English because their forefathers had successfully learnt British English by means of the Grammar-Translation method (Hoque, 2008). Gradually, with the adoption of ELT and CLT, teachers'

training started aiming at different methods and techniques of teaching to enhance the existing English teaching status (Schermann & Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014). Moreover, English has occupied an important place at the national level and has been introduced as a compulsory subject. It requires great expertise to teach it effectively. It was acknowledged that teaching English as a general subject, teaching it as a foreign language skill and teaching it also as a subject demands distinct skill sets.

Nevertheless, it is seen that Bangladesh as a country failed in implementing the English Language Teaching (ELT) policy even after appointing a number of commissions to review the studies of ELT and bring changes accordingly. In fact, experts in ELT were assigned to teach English, so that students could be taught about their cultures and traditions. The latest additions in the policy framework of the English language were to limit the use of it to specific work or target but expand it to infuse knowledge in the country (Thomason, 2000). The present condition of ELT is to be examined to evaluate the present status of “English Language Teaching” in Bangladesh. English is being taught in most educational institutions at the college level as a literature subject. No attention has been given to the learning aspect of English as a language. At Dhaka University, the students were given English as a compulsory subject in their every semester. The rule was applicable in all the departments in the Art Stream of the said university (Thomason, 2000).

#### **4.1 Medium of Instruction**

The Bangladesh government introduced English as a subject in order to develop the language skills of students. The focus was on teaching English as a functional language to enable students to communicate effectively. According to the 2006 report of the Ministry of Education’s Statistics, English was prioritised over Bengali and other subjects such as Hindi and Mathematics. The teachers should be given appropriate training before teaching English language at all levels of the education system. Schools and universities were required to provide tools and equipment to the teachers. Also, the schools had to provide basic facilities to the teachers as well as the students. With regard to the significance of English in global communication, the premier of Bangladesh specified that the emphasis was placed on teaching English alongside the first language to promote job opportunities in foreign countries and encourage technology transfer (Steinmetz, 1983).



#### 4.1.1 Primary Level

At six years old, children are required to start elementary school. Education in Bangladesh is mandatory until the end of eighth grade. Introducing a student to a foreign language at the primary level was deemed unjustified due to psychological and pedagogical reasons. The new education policy aimed to provide universal access to basic education (Malak, 2013). Since there was a high demand for English, it was later introduced as a subject in the last two classes at the primary level. As a result, English and Bangla are introduced as required subjects at the primary level. The curriculum places a strong emphasis on learning the fundamentals of English communication.

#### 4.1.2 Secondary Level

Grammar, literature and communication skills are all part of the more extensive curriculum for teaching English as a second/foreign language in secondary school. The policy of the school will determine whether Bangla or English is used as the medium of instruction. Written exams and ongoing evaluations are used in this level of assessment to gauge students' English language skills. Secondary schooling was considered to be the most important stage in the education system where the mind development was supposed to occur (Hoque, 2008). In secondary level education, students study English as a mandatory subject for 10 years. In those 10 years, students were taught an extensive form of English. Students were primarily helped to develop four language skills, with a greater emphasis on reading and writing. At that stage, students were advised to begin with a guide-book to improve their grades. This also enabled them to translate a Bengali written passage into English. In contrast, private schools were higher in number being around 34,000 and employed a significant number of teachers (Bangladesh Education Statistics, 2022). On completion of the 10<sup>th</sup> Standard, students were required to appear for the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, a state-mandated examination. The examination followed a common pattern that was regionally administered by several education boards (Farooqui, 2014).

#### 4.1.3 Higher Secondary Level

English is a compulsory subject in the higher secondary level and the curriculum is made to get students ready for both tertiary level and the workforce. The emphasis is on the critical thinking,



advanced language proficiency and the use of English in both academic and professional settings. Once the students passed their secondary examinations, they tended to enrol themselves for higher secondary education. These action resulted in an improvement in the enrolment growth rate at around 51.15% during the post-colonialism period (The World Bank, 1971). The major aim of introducing English at the secondary level was to strengthen the command and fluency of English which could develop through revision and practice activities. Short stories and comprehension texts were included in the academic syllabus, requiring students to read and comprehend the texts and answer corresponding questions, as mentioned by Lawson and Sachdev in 2004. Students were also recommended to develop good translation skills using any reference book or Oxford English Dictionary. Higher secondary education was just not an extensive version of secondary education, but it was basically to prepare the students for the college level. The performance in the exams like SSC (Secondary School Certificate) was the basic criteria based on which the students were given admission to colleges (Hamid & Jahan, 2015). According to the *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022* report, public institutions establish 685 (about 28.9%), while private institutions lead with 1689 (approximately 71.1%). Similarly, public institutions engage 14,892 teachers (29.5%), whereas private institutions hire 35,615 teachers (70.5%). The above imbalance statistics highlight the reliance on private providers to meet the growing demand for higher secondary education.

#### 4.1.4 Tertiary Level

English is the main language of instruction at several private universities and in certain public university programs in tertiary education. Research skills, academic English competence and effective communication in a worldwide workplace are the main areas of focus. At the tertiary level, students had a wide range of options to choose from for their careers, including medical, economics, commerce, engineering, and various other streams. The purpose of reintroducing English at the college level was to enhance the existing basic knowledge of the students that they had to gain during schooling. There were different disciplines in which English was taught to the students at the university level such as English for medicine, engineering and agriculture. English language instruction emphasised writing and reading skills while equal importance was given to listening and speaking for real-life English usage (Sultana, 2012). The passing of the act to introduce English-medium colleges in Bangladesh was an important event (Hamid, 2009).

Hundred-three universities are established with the implementation of this act (University Grants Commission, 2025). Since English is the most important language of all time, these universities have given special status to English language. Overall, English was kept as an optional subject at the higher level of education (Rahman, 2007). The tertiary level was marked by the effective translation of English to Bangla. Therefore, English mostly remained a medium of instruction at the tertiary level (Begum, 2015).

## **5. Current status and challenge**

In Bangladesh, proficiency in English is still essential for both academia and professional success today. Moreover, English language proficiency is crucial for higher education, particularly for individuals aspiring to study overseas, secure a top job or interact with people around the world. However, socioeconomic differences and uneven teaching quality are the main causes of the persistence of the English proficiency gap. Furthermore, students frequently have trouble combining Bangla and English in a hybrid communication style called “Banglish” or “code-mixing” that reflects changing linguistic reality but also raises questions regarding language purity.

## **6. Socioeconomic implications of English integration**

The integration of English into the education system of Bangladesh carries substantial socioeconomic implications. English language proficiency opens doors to further education, greater career prospects and upward social mobility, specifically in urban areas. But this change in language also makes inequality worse because poor and rural populations still have limited access to high-quality English education. As a result, English serves as both a tool for intellectual interaction and a gauge of socioeconomic status within the nation.

## **7. Conclusion**

Bangladesh has always highlighted the significance of English not only as a means of linking languages but also with respect to its use in various other domains like administration, education, law, and media. English has obtained a distinctive position within the socio-political structure of Bangladesh, starting from British rule to its separation from India and later from Pakistan. It is recognised within the constitution and mandated as a subject in the education curriculum. Bangladesh has recognised the importance of Bangla as a national language, but the public demand

and the need for global competitiveness have compelled the country to focus on enhancing the quality of English. The main aim of the Bangladesh government focused on developing the four skills of English teaching language, i.e., *listening, speaking, reading, and writing*. Following this, the pedagogical and psychological aspects of the region enforced different levels of English at primary, secondary, higher secondary and tertiary levels. Apart from the perspective of students, it was also seen that teachers were given proper training so as to deliver the lectures efficiently. In consideration of this, the implementation of the ELT and CLT policy framework also indicated the importance of four said language skills to score good grades in school. Therefore, the practical needs of the English language were identified over time and accordingly, its development occurred through the division of the functions of English at different levels. It was thus important to identify the purpose and duration of teaching a section of an English subject. Equally important was to identify for whom and by whom English was being taught. With the three phases of Bangladesh, English as a language has shown great success. Bangladesh realised that English was a connecting language and important to promote trade and commerce across the globe via it. Also, in the case of levels of education, during the primary level of education, English was introduced as a mandatory subject in the last two classes. This was done so that the students could gain basic knowledge of the English alphabet and basic vocabulary. At the secondary level, the students were assigned English as a mandatory subject in all classes. Moreover, at the tertiary level, the emphasis was given to active vocabulary and long sentences. Overall, the government of Bangladesh has given high priority to English as a language in its constitution but there remain several deficiencies concerning its implementation in terms of appropriate training and development sessions, apt infrastructure and management, tools and equipment and study material. Finally, to achieve the national aspirations for English language education, future initiatives should concentrate on strengthening teacher training, improving classroom pedagogy and coordinating policy goals with real-world implementation.

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