

English Language Teaching in Bangladesh Open University : Changing Scenario

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe the context of English language teaching in Bangladesh, in an attempt to find out the present situation and the problems within it, and to conclude by making some proposals and recommendations towards the improvement of the situation. The paper will also focus on the aims and objectives of the Bangladesh Open University that is attempting to minimise the problems in teaching/learning situation in Bangladesh.

2. Bangladesh and English Language Teaching

During the Pakistan period, as a legacy of British rule, English was a second language in Bangladesh (the then East Pakistan). The educated or even fairly educated people had to use English for official, professional, educational and other purposes. However, after the War of Liberation in 1971 in independent Bangladesh the official status of the English language changed to that of a foreign language. In this monolingual country people could do almost everything in Bengali, thus not using English in real life communication, they started facing problems when they were required to communicate in English. More recently, in the EFL situation in post-liberation Bangladesh, English has regained an important unofficial status. English is used in many government, semi-government and private organisations along with Bengali.

The changing scenario : The effect of using the traditional teaching methods has proved to be counterproductive, encouraging rote learning. The students study English as a required subject, work hard to memorise the textbook contents and language forms and get high marks in their exams, yet the majority are unable to acquire even a minimum competence in the language needed for effective communication.

Parents in general regard learning English as a necessity for their children as they believe that it opens up doors to a better future. More opportunities for business, travel, studies, jobs, etc. within the country and with other countries as well have made it necessary to shift the emphasis towards teaching communicative abilities, especially conversational skills. Sensing the growing demand and the necessity of its use, a conscientious section of educators, parents and administrators realise that something has to be done to improve the present sorry state of English.

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3. Place of English in the National Curriculum

English is studied as a compulsory subject in our curriculum to meet specific purposes, e.g. to provide overseas employment, to help to transact foreign trade and commerce and to facilitate higher studies. English is taught also to enable learners to be acquainted with the culture, tradition, history and the country in general of the target language and also to pursue knowledge and pleasure about the world. Learners study English for 14 years. During this long period both English and Bengali are given the same weight.

Use of the language : The National Syllabus and Curriculum Committee has specified that : 'The English language syllabus aims to focus on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as learner-centred activities within communicative contexts' (New syllabus for secondary and higher secondary levels, NCTB, 1995). But in reality, when English is used in a class, the teachers are more focused on teaching reading, translation and writing as these are the exam-oriented skills (Hoque *et al.*, 1997).

Most of the teachers fail to recognize that the imaginative function of language is as important as the representational one. As Fisher and Terry (1982) point out, they also do not pay much attention to 'the development of language in all its models or functions but just concentrate on the representational function'.

4. Problems in Speaking

Bygate (1987) opines, 'Speaking is in many ways an under valued skill.... which deserves attention'. In the present circumstances the students are able to read works in the original, but unfortunately are 'unable to ask for a glass of water', (Dawson and Pospisil, 1993). Most language teachers agree that to get the students talking is both the most difficult and also the most satisfying thing. student's main problem lies with expressing their thoughts. And the possible reasons behind poor proficiency in speaking are :

- *English is seldom used socially and is confined mainly to the classroom (in reality, not even that)*
- *Overemphasis on grammatical accuracy, rather than on fluency, leads to a fear about expression*

Overuse of the mother tongue in English class hampers the development of spoken skills.

Moreover, spoken skill is not at all assessed in the primary and secondary level. When it is tested in the tertiary level, only language structure and grammar

is evaluated, and if it is tested as part of a literature course, then only literary knowledge is assessed. Both of these methods of assessment encourage the learners to memorise formulaic expressions. Hence, there is no correspondence between the syllabus objectives (3.1) and the students' performance. Fisher and Terry (1982) observe, 'Often, owing to evaluative measures and grading policies, teachers tend to place a higher value on written work than on oral work'.

According to Wilkins (1974: 76), as classroom activity is determined by the teacher, 'we are protecting [the learner] from the additional, burden of having to make his own choices'. As a result 'He will not be able to transfer his knowledge from a language-learning situation to a language-using situation. The difference between 'knowledge' about a language and 'skill' in using it is crucial in the teaching of speaking (Bygate, 1987:3).

5. Institutions : Government and Private

In Bangladesh, educational institutions belong to both government and private sectors. The students in most of the government schools in the rural areas are not aware of the aims and objectives of learning English, except that they have to pass the exams. Of all the students, some benefit from the study of English, no doubt, but some others do not need to study English at all for 14 long years.

Now if English is not taught in the beginning classes at the government institutions, it will continue to be taught at this level at the privately managed ones. Under this circumstance a huge number of learners will hardly know any English and will face difficulty in coping with English at later stages of their study. Learners coming from the English medium stream will get better jobs and stand better chances of getting foreign scholarships for higher studies. Therefore, the majority of the students will not be able to compete with these high achievers and the policy of giving equal opportunity to everyone in society can not be ensured.

Apart from learning English through a national or regional curriculum, individual learners may choose 'Spoken English' courses offered by private language institutes. Bangladesh Open University, aiming at catering to the needs of the people in general, also runs similar programmes.

Teaching material : In our country textbooks at the rate of one title per class are produced centrally by NCTB (National curriculum and Textbook Board), which all the mainstream schools have to use. All these books use the communicative approach to some extent. And every book includes literary texts which are integrated with the main topic of the unit. The teachers depend solely on the textbook contents and methodology for what they call teaching English. According to McRae (1991),

the teacher who follows any course-book slavishly will inevitably bore him or herself as well as the students. And the excuse of 'getting through the book by the end of the course' is one of the most counterproductive and openly anti-learning attitudes and encourages rote-learning at the expense of communicative use of the language (McRae, 1991 : 23).

6. Students

In an unfavourable situation, when the English teacher explains everything in Bengali in the classroom, the students are deprived of an opportunity of listening to and speaking in English. Although the students know much of grammatical norms and forms, at the end the study of English turns into the study of mainly the language contents - not as means to an end but as an end in itself. Nevertheless, according to a survey the students are eager to learn English and want to speak with confidence and make use of the language as an excellent means of social solidarity, of educational and professional advancement and of business.

7. Teachers

Many of the teachers themselves lack proficiency in spoken English. The fault lies in their educational background because in post-liberation Bangladesh the decision of making Bengali the only official language affected the general standard of English. But most of the teachers have the requisite level of proficiency in grammar, reading and writing. In addition, very often teachers teach things they do not prefer to teach, just because they have to follow closely the prescribed syllabus.

Nevertheless, Fisher and Terry (1982) observe that, through proper planning and using the information available about the learner, the teacher could form the classroom curriculum, use the existing materials effectively and become a facilitator or director of learning rather than the dispenser of knowledge.

Teacher Training : Most of the teachers have no training in ELF and the ones who have received training also face transfer problem, as Britten (1988) states, with their qualification, they tend to relapse into the old way of teaching, which is still used and promoted by many of their senior colleagues. They also become reluctant to make proper use of their training because their teaching is hardly supervised. As a result they fail to impart effective and enjoyable teaching by arousing students' interest in the subject and thus English turns out to be a dull and difficult subject on the curriculum.

8. Student's Attitudes : The Bangladeshi students in general *do* read enthusiastically and regularly, motivation being :

- *Cultural (out of interest, for personal or study reasons),*
- *Social (elitism, one-upmanship, 'have you read?')*
- *Educational (EAP, education for life) ; and*
- *Self-centred (for pleasure, enjoyment, entertainment, etc.).*

Such keenness is usually the result of self-motivation rather than of carefully planned and successful teaching. And self-motivation should not be undervalued in a context like Bangladesh. Practically speaking, people who can converse in English in Bangladesh are able to do so mainly from their own reading and making use of the opportunities available to them.

9. Methodology Currently Used

Traditional teaching methodology (teacher-centred grammar-translation method), as discussed earlier, is not suitable for teaching communicative English, but only for meeting the requirements of the present examination system. That is why, even if a teacher knows how to make her/his learners practice oral skills, s/he does not find it worth practising. There is a need for a methodology change in the teaching of 'foreign' literature to bring it more into line with the learner-centred, collaborative approach of the communicative method (Bassnett and Grundy, 1993).

10. The Idea of Open Learning

Open Universities represent the new wave in education. Millions today are studying in the open system and benefiting from it. It has become a source of hope, inspiration and encouragement the people who were deprived of the opportunity of participation in mainstream education. Open universities give a second chance to them, not allowing time, space or place to act as barriers to education. However, what the open university of a country teaches is based upon the need of that country. The study method used in the open university can appeal to real activity and to spontaneous work based upon personal need and interest :

i) The Bangladesh Open University (BOU) : With a view to imparting education to all, especially the deprived or the less fortunate groups, Bangladesh Open University was established by an act of Parliament in October 1992. The university aims at human resource development by providing need-based education in both formal and non-formal modes.

BOU provides the facilities of the open learning system, and the rich resources that are available there, along with the flexibility of study, is a strong source of encouragement. Helping the learners to become more independent in their learning also increases their life choices. Littlejohn (1985) suggests that one outcome of

learners acting more autonomously may be an increase in enthusiasm for learning.

In 1993 a need assessment survey was conducted by the BOU throughout the country to formulate its formal and non-formal programmes. The survey was carried out to find out the students' motivational attitudes and their psychological and social needs because the students did not appear to be learning from and engaging with the main course books that were being used. The survey came up with findings like: learners wanted to learn English because it is an important world language, they wanted to be able to communicate in English and to put especial emphasis on listening, speaking and study skills. The need assessment survey proved successful in identifying the sources of the problems.

ii) The Teaching and Tutorial System : In the open learning system, the package of learning materials (books, audio-cassettes, etc.) are so prepared that the learner can learn on her/his own. Additional support is given through radio and television programmes. Moreover, tutorial classes ensure that the students are not kept isolated and deprived of the warmth and advantages of classroom teaching. At the tutorial centres the tutors and the students meet to discuss the problem areas. These tutorials also enable the students to interact with one another, saving them from a sense of alienation and loneliness.

The tutors, appointed by the School authority are given intensive training before they join the BOU as tutors. In contrast to the traditional system of teaching here the tutor will not give the student lectures on the entire syllabus or on its parts. During the hours of self-study the student is expected to identify his/her problem areas and then to raise those issues for discussion in class. These are therefore more like discussion and group work classes, rather than teacher-centred lectures. The perceived gap between teacher and learner is as small as possible here because the more authoritarian the teacher, the less independence the learner retains.

iii) The Question of Learner Autonomy and BOU : According to Boud (1988 : 23) : 'The main characteristic of autonomy as an approach to learning is that students take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instructions'. And Knowles (1975) points out the importance of preparing learners for a rapidly changing future, in which independence in learning is vital for functioning effectively in society.

An advantage of being a student of BOU is that s/he can do her/his occupational work and complete different courses/programmes at the same time. The learners belonging to the BOU :

- *take responsibility for their own learning*
- *choose their own time and place of learning according to their needs*
- *carry out their learning activities individually and also in groups (at the tutorial classes)*
- *study at their own pace and convenience*
- *have to be active and alert throughout the programme*
- *assess their own progress*

Promoting learner autonomy can be justified on pedagogical grounds also, since : 'Adults demonstrably learn more, and more effectively, when they are consulted about dimensions such as the pace, sequence, mode of instruction and even the content of what they are studying' (Candy, 1988 : 75)

A student-centred class the learners might take responsibility by 'setting their own goals, planning practice opportunities, or assessing their progress' (Cotterall, 1995 : 219). And learners who are involved in making choices and decisions about aspects of the programme are also likely to feel more secure in their learning (Joiner, cited in McCafferty, 1981). Student-centred approaches, assisted and monitored by the teacher, are more likely to deliver a lasting enjoyment of learning. The certificate the learners will receive after successful completion of the course will help them get a better job (many advertisements for jobs set a prerequisite of competency in specific language areas) (section 3.1).

11. Suggestions and Recommendations

To provide the students with the maximum benefit in an atmosphere where English is a foreign language, teachers should involve them in a variety of activities, e.g. pair work, role-play, question-answer, discussions, projects, etc. given in the textbook and also prepared by themselves. Student participation should be given priority over teacher participation as the basic skills of language can best be practised through learner-centred activities and so tasks should be interesting and relevant to the learners' life and environment.

In general the teacher's attitude towards learning English by the 'read and translate' method should be changed and they need to be made aware that translating is a quite separate and distinct skill from language learning (McRea, 1991).

The language for classroom management, such as instructions given, questions asked by the teacher/students and answers given, should be English. Using English for these purposes will increase the amount of practice in spoken skills. This will give the students and impression that English, like the mother tongue, can be used for real

life communication. The immersion in English might initially pose some problems of understanding but if the technique of all-English presentation and practice is continued, the learners will quite soon develop their comprehension capacity.

As regards error correction, the teacher should create an environment in which mistakes are accepted as part of the learning process. George (1972) opines that the correction of every error provides no guarantee that students will learn from their mistakes. And Burt (1975) suggests that limiting correction allows students to increase their motivation and self-confidence. It is likely that through practice and over time students will develop their conversational skill. The students should therefore be encouraged to speak first, not thinking all the time of correctness of grammar or expression. Once they get into the habit of speaking, breaking the ice of shyness and fear, it is likely that they will be enthusiastic enough to make their contribution as accurate as possible.

Learner autonomy being the key, the learners will develop a sense of responsibility towards learning and achievement rather than being spoon-fed by the teacher. This will enhance their sense of self-achievement, confidence and autonomy. The practical argument for promoting learner autonomy is that in the long run a teacher may not always be available to assist. Learners need to be able to learn on their own because they do not have access to the kind or amount of individual instruction they need in order to become proficient in the language. Finally, learners become more efficient in their language learning if they do not have to spend time waiting for the teacher to provide them with resources or solve their problems (Cotterall, 1995).

As regards testing and evaluation, the test questions should be so framed that the students are not encouraged to memorize pre-fabricated answers, as happens now. Instead they would be compelled to think individually and independently in order to answer them. Oral examinations of this kind are free from the dangers of the candidate offering a prepared speech. If classroom procedures have familiarized students with the interactive possibilities of group discussion regarding representational materials, there need be no undue examination nervousness. Again, the teaching should be closely related to both *what* will be tested and *how* it will be tested.

Apart from getting a degree, the students will be encouraged to talk whenever it is possible. They will be given contexts and materials that will allow them to develop the habits of thinking and expressing themselves in English. A main strand of the material may usefully be literature-based. As the open university is becoming more and more popular, it is believed that by proper use of the rich resources available there the benefits can reach the masses at the grass-roots level. As at present the

ability to speak in English is in very great demand, it would be a pity to restrict the opportunities to the economically advantaged urban few. Moreover, the fact that, open university expenses are comparatively affordable could be beneficial, have a positive impact on learning, and ensure equal educational opportunities for all.

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