

History of English Teaching in Bangladesh: From Inception to Present Practice

S. M. Faisal Arafat & Susmita Rejwana Mehnaaz

Abstract:

This paper is a brief analysis of English language learning and teaching practice in Bangladesh. It shows the history of English language introduction in the country by the British rulers as a part of Indian subcontinent and then presents a gradual discussion about the evolution of the language practice with all its highs and lows since the inception to the present situation. Prominent language teaching methodologies have eventually emerged as a part of discussion but the paper does not opine for any specific method to be the most suited but within a very limited scope, a picture of the prevailing language reality has been surfaced in the study. This is just a neutral analysis, a critical approach drawn from the related resources. The paper intends to draw the attention of the policymakers to provide an impetus to the thought of delivering the learners and the teachers a teaching learning practice which serves best for the nation.



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Introduction

The inherent intelligence of human brain guided the earliest of the race, to discover a media of communication. The endeavour resulted into pictorial symbols. Symbols resulted into signs and the science of signs rolled on in the form of language. Not only every nation but also a very tiny community has also developed their mother tongue. Colonization and civilization introduced, intermingled, dominated and transformed into other languages. And now English raise its flag as the most spread global language, the lingua franca. "The British Empire may be in full retreat with the handover of Hong Kong. But from Bengal to Belize and Las Vegas to Lahore, the language of the sceptred isle is rapidly becoming the first global lingua franca" (Crystal, 2003, p. 1). This 'lingua franca' as an essential part of education system in Bangladesh has seen many rises and falls. The British as the colonial power left. Politics had written the fate of the land as a part of Pakistan. After a long and bloody struggle an independent Bangladesh emerged. English education through these turbulent years also had shifted dimensions. English as a foreign language in Bangladesh is being taught from primary to higher secondary level as a compulsory subject.

English in Bangladesh as a Part of Indian Subcontinent

The earliest history of English education in Bangladesh as a language goes back to the country's belonging as a part of the Indian subcontinent as a colony of the British Empire. The British Raj wanted mediators to facilitate their proceedings in India through the use of English. At the very beginning the upper caste Hindus became the assistants for them. Gradually the process of establishing institutions by the Christian missionaries and British government went on. English became the language of office (Vijayalakshi & Babu, 2014). Another reliable source of information regarding inception of English as official language into Indian subcontinent can be drawn from the work of Azam and Kusakabe (2018) who cited Rahman (1991) in their work as:

English education was introduced in this subcontinent in the late 18th century through the establishment of some English medium schools by some British individuals. But it got official recognition in 1835 by the Minute of Lord Macaulay. The approval of this Minute by Lord William Bentinck established the foundation of the British policy of education in the then British India. The rationale behind this establishment apparently was to spread the light of global education in the then India. Lord Macaulay had a stronger view in support of the spread of the European education, i.e., English education rather than the native or Persian or Arabic education. Subsequently, it was introduced in the secondary schools all over the region by the early 20th century (p. 107).

English in Bangladesh as a Part of Pakistan

In 1947, When Indian Subcontinent got divided into two independent states as India and Pakistan, importance of English emerged from new angle of necessity. East and West Pakistan suffered a turbulent political situation. History shows evidently and clearly the struggle East Pakistan faced due to political oppression and suppression brought upon by the West Pakistanis. The first mass rising was the language movement in 1952 for the right of Bangla as one of the major state languages of Pakistan. But over the issue of a common language regarding the two sides of Pakistan, English was in the status of second language due to increasing importance of communicational and functional purposes. English was used as the second language in the government and nongovernment offices. For academic curriculum, it was being taught as a subject in Bengali medium schools from grade 3 to grade 10. Then in

the higher secondary level, the medium of instruction switched into English (Azam & Kusakabe, 2018).

English in Independent Bangladesh

Historically, the English language was in a state of rising and fall in Bangladesh since the independence in 1971. Immediately after the independence of the country from Pakistan, Bangla became the national language (Banu & Sussex, 2001). An amendment in the constitution of 1972, hailed Bangla as the medium of communication in all state academic institutions (Rahman, 2010). Since then there has been different transformations in the system of teaching English in Bangladesh. Rahman and Pandian (2018) says:

After independence, eight education commissions developed blueprints for education policy - the Education Commission Report (1974), the English Teaching Taskforce Commission (1976), the Bangladesh National Education Commission Report (1988), the National Curriculum Committee (1991), the National Education Policy (2000), the Bari Commission Report (2002), the Miah Commission Report (2004), and the National Education Policy (2010). Nevertheless, the status of English has been inconsistent all the way from the first to the last of these reports (p. 44).

The age-old tradition of English teaching in Bangladesh has been the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). Considering the global context, the policy makers thought for a change. This change was to opting for the practice of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Grammar Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) evolved from the Classical Method that was used from the 15th century in the teaching of Latin and Greek. The method focuses on the literature and grammar of the target language, with passages being translated into and from the mother tongue. Consequently it tends to be very much text-based. Typically, the teacher gives instructions and grammatical explanations in the mother tongue. Little or no attempt is made to teach pronunciation. In the 18th and 19th century other languages started being taught in the western world educational institutions. Then this classical method was adopted for foreign language teaching. This method effectively came to be known as Grammar Translation Method in the 19th century. "Grammar-Translation Method began in Germany, or more accurately, in Prussia, at the end of the eighteenth century", says Chang (2010, p. 15). As it has been mentioned earlier that GTM which originated from the Classical Method to teach Latin or Greek, over the period of time in Europe, it eventually was opted to teach dominating foreign languages in Europe such as German, French and English. When England became the most dominating colonial powerhouse in the 17th century, their language also eventually became the most widespread medium of linguistic colonialism.

The Grammar Translation Method is basically a translation based method where grammar is taught deductively. It means a teacher focuses on presenting the rules of grammar and then practice continues through translation exercises. The learning practice of vocabulary solely depends on the text reading, dictionary study and memorisation. Thus reading and writing remains the major focus in GTM, and little or no systematic attention is given to speaking or listening (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Communicative Language Teaching

As an approach of language teaching, CLT originated in the 1960s from theories of world famous linguist Noam Chomsky. But CLT's first formal introduction is registered in 1971 as

Richards and Rodgers (2014) cited Van Ek & Alexander (1980) mentioning that in search of a systematic language teaching approach which assesses learners' needs, experts opined for a functional and communicative model of language teaching. Researches do not find any single linguist giving credit to the coinage of the term CLT. Richards and Rodgers (2014) claimed a conjoined effort from different writers and organizations, language teaching specialists, curriculum development centres and government agencies to prioritise a Communicative Approach which finally came to be known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Gradually both American and British proponents described CLT as

... an approach to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching. Richards (2006) defines CLT as Communicative language teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom (p. 2).

GTM versus CLT from Bangladesh's Perspective

To emphasise equally on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing a new curriculum was introduced in 1996 and a revised curriculum was introduced in 2012. The intention behind this shifting policy was driven with a hope of developing communicative competence among students. Many studies revealed that although English has been taught compulsorily in the schools of Bangladesh for a period of ten years, most of the students cannot communicate well enough in terms of oral communication and find it difficult to manage in real life situations (Podder, 2013). Podder, also citing Imam (2005) reports:

The average English language skill level of university students is equivalent to that which is set by the government for the students of class seven. In order to address the low levels of oral communication proficiency, the government of Bangladesh introduced Communicative English to class six in 1996; and then to higher classes at the secondary level on an incremental basis (p. 54).

Communicative Language Teaching in Bangladesh was effectively incorporated in the curriculum of 2012 with a view to developing quality education focusing on creativity, critical thinking and lifelong learning (National Curriculum, 2012). But had GTM been an utter failure? There is a general belief among the Bangladeshis that earlier generations had greater command over the knowledge of English. There are legends that someone who had passed matriculation exam with distinction in the pre liberation period and immediately after the liberation, were being visited by people from distant places of the country. People just wanted to see the faces of those genius minds. Their stock of vocabulary regarding English and their sense of communication maintained a high standard. Nowadays this country is producing thousands of graduates every year but the oral and written both skills remain a pity. Podder's (2013) words mentioned above provide an immediate testimony to the statement. Some researches claim that GTM used to be more successful from the perspective of Bangladesh. A debate can hover over all the theories of language teaching whether the impact and influence of mother tongue can be denied in terms of effective learning of a foreign or a second language. The simple calculation is, if a person successfully relates his/her mother language to any other foreign languages s/he can understand the phenomena of the foreign language more appropriately. Islam and Ahsan (2011) considering teachers as respondents, reports in table-21 in their study:

81.25 per cent of the respondents think that it is necessary that the teachers use Bangla when they 'define new and difficult words, phrases or expressions,' with a frequency of 13.

The necessity of using Bangla 'to explain complex grammar' has been affirmed by 81.25 per cent (p. 214).

In the same study when considering the students as their respondents whether the use of Bangla in the English classroom makes the students feel comfortable or not, in table-7 they report:

3.75 per cent respondents observe that any class fully in English does never create any problem for them to understand or comprehend the respective lessons whereas 8 per cent respondents observe that it is sometimes problematic. 49 per cent subjects respond to face problem in a moderate form while 17 per cent of them respond it to be frequent. The rest 17 per cent observe that they are always in problem to comprehend English lessons if the class is held fully in English (p. 207).

Very often the field level opinions from the stake holders i.e. the teachers and students reflect gap in the thinking of policy level to the implementation level. It seems that somehow the voice from teachers and students is remaining unheard. CLT being the dominating practice in the global scenario tends to thrive but there are some scholars who still opt for the traditional Grammar Translation Method. Austin (2003) states that he could find his students' intelligence by using the grammar translation method. It opened for him more freedom regarding teaching a language. It also injected a sense of assurance among his students which could have been proven more difficult while using any other method or approach. Taking about the advantages of GTM while teaching English in China, Kong (2011) remarked about the positive impacts of GTM in the educational transitional period in China in 1980s and 90s. Teachers in the educational institutions of China while teaching English as a foreign language encouraged the students to practise foreign texts following grammar rules and then practising their own skill over the language following the original works. His study revealed how profoundly grammar learning allowed students to master abstract meaning of foreign words, complex sentence structures, extensive reading and writing abilities and thus cultivated the intellectual faculty of the students.

In Bangladesh the policymakers must have introduced CLT with a great hope. But there remains a significant gap between the intention of the curriculum and the practice of English teaching in the field level. Against the huge amount of students in the entire country, a very limited portion studies in English Medium and Version. Major portion of the students still remain in a kind of unusualness while learning English as a foreign language. Classroom teaching situation also remains far from being effective. English learning in our country is based on learning word meaning system. Students do get some low-quality guidebooks where Bangla translation of every text is given. They just try to memorise those things. Even studies have found that the teachers most often encourage practising those guidebooks. Students are mostly interested in solving, practising and memorising the examination-style, model test questions. The main objective is to obtain a good grade, not to learn English for communication. Therefore, students' results are very good as a large number of students are getting 'A+' and 'A' grades in English, but their test scores do not indicate their actual English proficiency levels (Shahidullah, 2012). Students answer some given seen comprehension based on the textbook. Guidebooks are designed after the textbooks with loads of comprehensions and the common concept for teachers and students are to calculate the percentage of familiar questions appeared on the board exams. At no stage of the education system, students are encouraged to process the information of the text by themselves through an intellectual engagement, analysis and interpretation of the text. Most of the students are

not good at any of the skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening, which we need for our survival today; and they are not really prepared for the vast amount of reading and writing required at the tertiary level of education (Chaudhury, 2011).

Conclusion

It was due to British colonialism that English as a language got introduced in the Indian Subcontinent. Riding over the roller coaster of political and social influences, the journey of English in Bangladesh has come to present scenario. Language is a sentiment and for Bangladesh the sentiment is one of the strongest of its kind as we hold our head high as the only nation to fight for the right of mother language. This emotional exuberance saw English being temporarily suspended as the medium of instruction in all the academic institutions in 1972 although the Education Commission formed in 1972 never disregarded the instrumental role of English (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). Standing in the 21st century, for a developing country like Bangladesh the necessity of learning English as a global language can never be denied. But the scenario of English language teaching and learning here still remains far from being hopeful. In Bangladesh students are required to read English for about twelve years as compulsory and even then in some universities also as a foundation course. But the level of proficiency they reach is very low. Bangladesh as a developing country needs a league of competent people in English to make a mark on the global market economy because English is the language of science, technology, higher education, diplomacy, international trade and commerce. Hence if there is any impediment in the field of teaching and learning of this language that should be identified. At present CLT is the accepted practice but CLT even being in vogue for over a decade has not yet yielded the expected outcome. The point is that CLT is not the end. As language itself is a very evolving phenomenon, the process of language teaching should also be evolving. Whatever may be the English Language Teaching policy in Bangladesh, it must be the best suiting for the teachers and students.

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