

Challenges of Teaching English Language at the Primary Level Schools in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The study explores the challenges of teaching English language at the schools of primary level in Bangladesh. In recent years, the Government of Bangladesh has worked to implement a language policy to foster a communicative approach to English language teaching (ELT) at the primary level in the Bangladesh. In this study two sets of questionnaire were used to collect data from students and teachers to assess the situation of English language teaching and learning in the primary schools of Bangladesh. Interviews were also taken from the teachers and English teaching sessions were observed using an observation checklist in order to find out the real present scenario of teaching English language at the primary level. Most of the students of the primary schools are weak in English language due to lack of skilled and trained teachers who are familiar to the modern methods and approaches of teaching and lack of enough materials for teaching in the classroom. Thus English language teaching at the primary level schools in Bangladesh is becoming a big challenge day by day.

Keywords: *English language, challenges, ELT, primary level schools.*

Introduction

A broad goal of English language programs is that of developing the communicative ability to convey and interpret a message via written or spoken modalities to another person. The main purpose of using language is to communicate one's needs, necessities, feelings, thoughts and ideas with others. To learn language, comprehension strategies need to be more explicitly discussed and individual interpretation of texts need to be valued inside the

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classroom (Nath and Hossain, 2005). Children need to learn different reading strategies for example, scanning, skimming, and locating information throughout the text to solve different reading issues. Interactive communication in collaborative learning experiences helps learners to develop their thinking through language and develop their language through thinking. It has also experienced significant changes in the communication dynamics of the world. English as a subject is of paramount importance in equipping the students to take up the challenges of the competitive survival and growing globalization in developing countries. This is high time we started to see the future development of English as a world language and took proper initiatives to get learners to the global standard level. The global distributions of English are often described in terms of three contexts such as English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The main objectives of teaching English at the primary level education in Bangladesh are to enable students to understand simple commands, instructions and requests in English and carry them out. For the development of the communicative ability the Government of Bangladesh, in cooperation with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), has implemented a language policy to foster a communicative approach to English language teaching at the primary level schools under Bangladeshi educational system (Ahmed, 2001). The students can speak and converse in simple English according to their age level and can read to comprehend the textbooks set for their age group and level. They also write words, simple sentences, passages, paragraphs, informal letters and numbers according to their age group and level. Although NCTB prepared English curriculum for the students of the primary level schools to consider proper approaches and method, unfortunately the curriculum is not implemented properly. However, most of the students of primary schools are unable to attain the primary English language competencies due to prevailing challenges in our education system.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- ⇒ To highlight English language teaching-learning scenario in the classroom of the primary schools.
- ⇒ To identify the challenges of implementing English curriculum effectively at the primary schools.

Methodology

This study has been conducted on the basis of primary and secondary data. For the primary data although two sets of questionnaire (teachers and students) were used for survey, very few respondents from the both sides responded. However the researcher, later, collected the relevant data through interview and classroom observation. 30 respondents (24 students, 06 teachers) of 03 primary schools were interviewed. One English language teaching session of each school was also observed using observation checklist. Some secondary data needed for this study were also collected from published books, journals, research papers and reports.

English Language in the Primary School

Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner differ in important ways about their explanations of how children develop and learn, but they all agree that cognitive development of the child is linked to construction of knowledge in the brain within a social context (Banu, 2009). They also agree that language development linking sounds, words and meaning as a means of communication is a critical element of cognitive development. Drawing on these theories, researchers in language learning and teaching have developed the idea of Emergent Literacy. Clay (2001), the New Zealand educator who is one of the pioneers in studying young children's reading and writing and proponent of the concept of Emergent Literacy, underscores the critical importance of providing plenty of opportunities in the early grades of the primary school for listening, speaking, reading and writing and active engagement with peers and adults in reading and writing situations. Clay (2001) emphasizes that children learn to read so that they read to learn. It is essential that the tools of learning, through language skills development in one language, normally the mother tongue, are acquired early. Otherwise, the child becomes handicapped as a learner and the deficits become cumulative as the child moves up the ladder in the school. It is difficult to organize special remedial support and learning opportunities for children when the system is not working well to begin with. The child does not have a chance to recover and remain a poor performer in school or drops out. A bilingual or multi-lingual approach to language learning and medium of instruction is followed in many multi-lingual countries such as Switzerland, Belgium and Canada. Multiple languages, usually well developed and rich in literature and knowledge content, are given equal status in the education system and in public affairs in these countries (Jackson, 2005). Bilingualism refers to a situation where equal esteem and value are accorded to at least two languages as the medium of teaching and learning, learning materials are available in both languages, teachers are proficient in both languages and learners have the opportunity to become functionally skilled and proficient in both languages. Where ethnic and linguistic minorities are disadvantaged and equal opportunities for them are a concern, bilingual education is considered a way of bridging the transition from the mother tongue and the national language for young learners. It is also a way of recognizing and respecting the linguistic and cultural identity of the minority populations.

Objectives of English Curriculum in Primary school

The objectives of English Curriculum in Primary school are to:

1. understand simple commands/instructions/requests in English and carry them out.
2. speak and understand simple English according to their age level.
3. read and comprehend textbooks according to their age group and level.
4. write alphabets, words, numbers, simple sentences, passages, paragraphs, informal letters and numbers according to their age group and level.

Problems of English curriculum at the Primary Level School

All of the interviewees consent that there are lots of problems to implement English curriculum at the primary level schools in Bangladesh, such as high ratio of teacher-student and small size of classroom. Insufficiency of teaching aids is a common problem for which they cannot follow effective teaching-learning approach and lack of subject based training is the one of the main problems to implement the English curriculum. Unavailability of teacher guide (TG) is another barrier in implementing the primary English curriculum. All interviewees view that each teacher has to conduct seven or eight classes in a day. As a result they cannot take good preparation for the classes. All of the teachers claim that they have no language lab facilities and students were unable to practice listening which is one of the key and authentic sources of learning English language. They also admit that infrastructures such as school building, classroom size, electricity supply; library and books availability, hygienic toilet etc. are also liable for learning environment. Thus insufficient facilities of infrastructure affect the teaching-learning management tremendously and it becomes one of the toughest challenges for curriculum implementation process in rural areas of Bangladesh.

Principles of English Language Teaching (ELT)

There are some principles of ELT and their current interpretations. Key issues of ELT policy have been formulated as key tenets (Phillipson, 1992) which are as follows:

Tenet 1: English is best taught monolingually.

Tenet 2: The ideal teacher is a monolingual teacher.

Tenet 3: The earlier English is taught, the better the results.

Tenet 4: The more English is taught, the better the results.

Tenet 5: If other languages are used much, standards of English will drop.

Phillipson (1992) identifies each of these tenets a fallacy which are as follows:

The monolingual fallacy

The native speaker fallacy

The early start fallacy

The maximum exposure fallacy

The subtractive fallacy

Moreover, Makerere conference recommendations contrast with UNESCO report on Vernacular Education 1953 (NCTB, 2006). These tenets are also inappropriate on scientific and educational grounds and equally unacceptable both from pedagogic and linguistic points of view. Here, we can consider only two of these tenets that show us totally different perspectives. For example; tenet 3: the earlier English is taught, the better results. The UNESCO report pleads for proper educational grounding in which the use of the mother tongue should be extended as much as possible. The report highly encourages proper learning of mother tongue in early education as well as medium of instruction in teaching other subjects, as the students understand it best. Tenet 4: the more English is taught, the better the results. According to Pattanayak (Pattanayak, 1981:169; cited in Ripon, 2005) “trained teachers, well-written textual materials and improved methods of teaching are more important than length of time for which it is taught. In the absence of these, the teaching of English at lower stages has resulted in wastage of time or resources”.

Current scenario of English teaching at primary level

There are about 90,000 primary schools in the country where approximately 17 million students are enrolled. Teacher population is 264177 and teacher-student ratio is 1: 56. It is the highest ratio between teacher and student among all levels of education (Raju, 2003). UNICEF's 1995 figures indicate that 84% of the teachers had only Secondary School Certificate (SSC) or Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). Basic teacher training in the primary sector takes the form of one-year INSET course provided by instructors at Primary Training Institutes (PTIs). It is estimated that 87000 teachers in the non-government schools have not yet received training (Sadek, 2002). It is again a big concern that many of our primary schools do not have sufficient facilities of proper learning environment. Moreover, in the introduction of the English textbooks (for class 1-5) claim that these have been written following communicative approach where students' active participation in interaction through individual work, pair work and group work is stressed. Here teachers are expected to work as facilitators rather than traditional teachers and they should teach through songs, games, stories, reciting rhymes, role play, information gap activities and many other interactive tasks in order to teach all four language skills. However, considering the prevailing situation one can easily assume that the success rate of proper learning remains far below. It is pertinent to mention that "there are at the moment about 22 donor-funded projects that are working at the primary level and nearly half of these projects have an important ELT component to work on" (Karim, 1967). But most of them have their own agenda to improve ELT without having any inter-project coordination. One project called PERC has aimed at increasing the amount of English spoken by the teachers and pupils in the primary classrooms. As far as English language skills and methodology are concerned in PERC project workshops, primary teachers are said to lack basic teaching skills, target language skills, preparation time, resource and motivation. However, in another study, English teaching in secondary level has been noticed with great concern, as many teachers hardly can continue routine communication with their students in English, that how these teachers will facilitate classroom teaching through variety of interactive tasks. More than 60 years ago this sad situation was lamented thus: "In some cases incompetent teachers are employed" (USAID, 2002). Thus there creates a vicious circle in which we have the badly taught pupils of secondary schools becoming inefficient teachers and in their turn raising another generation of failure. Aiming at quantity first never produces quality; but if first aim is quality, then we may achieve quantity as well. Rabindranatha Tagore had a subtle reaction in which he criticizes the ability of primary school teachers. Those who teach in the lower level are only Entrance (SSC) passed and some of them have not English language norms and etiquettes and literature are not familiar with them (Haq, 1997). However, they first introduce our children with English. They know neither Bangla well, nor English. They can easily do one thing for our children making them forget rather than making them learn and they have become quite successful in doing the first. Spending over almost a generation time, a legitimate concern is that we do not feel complacent regarding any phenomenal success in our teaching-learning situation. By holding teachers responsible we can develop our critical awareness of one of the most important aspects of the prevailing situation; however, there are other facets of this scenario. Here lies the long felt fundamental question about direction-

oriented and fully-fledged ELT policy in education that is unfortunately yet to be formulated. A similar kind of urgency of an ELT policy in the country is also expressed. The above scenario of English language teaching clearly displays that although there have been a number of stray moves to improve the teaching standard, no definite, well-coordinated or well concerted effort has so far been taken to formulate language teaching policy befitting the country.

Quality Teaching at the Primary Level Schools

Despite some progress in primary education, deficiencies still exist; we need to identify what major problems are affecting the desired level of progress. Most specifically, problems of English teaching in primary level have to be determined from pragmatic point of view. When findings about learning achievement and competencies are also considered, it becomes obvious that the large majority of children of Bangladesh, as many as two out of three, are growing up into adulthood without basic literacy and numeracy skills and preparation for life (World Bank, 2000). Now it can be assumed that ineffective teaching learning prevailing in the schools is mainly responsible for this low achievement. As far as English teaching is concerned, it has been repeatedly mentioned that single biggest obstacle to English teaching in Bangladesh is the lack of competent teachers at all levels. In the issue of qualification, most of the teachers at primary level are either SSC or HSC qualified and many of them are not properly trained in teaching English. Besides, English being a compulsory subject with the same weight age as that of vernacular subject is one of the reasons of high dropout rate and the poor of quality education. To reduce dropout rate as well as the burden of English, it would be better to introduce English from class 3 where more qualified and trained English teachers can be engaged and then learning output will perhaps be better. Many countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, Russia and Thailand have introduced English at the secondary schools and are gaining better results. On the other hand, recently some other countries like China, South Korea, Malaysia and some provinces of India have introduced English in primary schools (Kamrunnesa and Salma, 1987). Bangladesh being predominantly a monolingual country where the mother tongue plays a vital as well as influential role in national and cultural life of the people deserves better care in educational scheme so that desired cognitive and vernacular language skill development of the learners can be ensured. This is how we can enrich our national and cultural life and pay tribute to the language martyrs of 1952 who sacrificed their lives for establishing the rightful place of their mother tongue, Bangla. On the other hand, for local, regional and international communication as well as professional and academic development English will continue to be taught in accordance with a thoughtful and detailed policy so that the outcomes of additional language learning can be meaningful and effective

Table-01: Basic facts from Student's Interviews

Statements	Percentage
Studying English regularly in the classroom	55
Speaking exercise in the classroom	08
Writing exercise in the classroom	12
Reading exercise in the classroom	17
Listening exercise in the class	00

Source: Field visit, March, 2012

From all respondents, 55% consent that they read English regularly; whereas 45% consent that they do not read English regularly. Among the respondents who do not read English regularly, 82% believe that English is hard, 7% do not get interest in English and 11% students think that teachers do not make them understand clearly and as a result they do not like to study English. 8% consent that English teachers make speaking exercise in the classroom, while 40% consent that English teachers sometimes make speaking exercise in the classrooms and 60% admit that English teachers rarely make speaking exercise in the classroom. Most of the students claim that teachers donot make writing exercise in the classroom. Only 12% consent that English teachers make writing exercise in the classroom. Among them 59 % think that English teachers always make writing exercise in the classroom; whereas 41% think that English teachers sometimes make writing exercise in the classroom. 17% consent that English teachers make reading exercise in the classroom. Among these students 81% consent that English teachers always make reading exercise and 19% think that English teachers sometimes make reading exercise in the classroom. Unfortunately, all students report that no English teachers make any listening practice in classroom.

Table-02: Results from Teacher's interviews

Statements	Percentage
Follow the instructions of teachers' guide	35
Knowledge about the aims, objectives of English	19
Training participation for professional skill development	54
Training to teach English	21
Lesson plan preparation	31
Using of language in English class	8
Use of teaching aid and instructional materials to teach English	6

Source: Field visit, March, 2012

Among all the respondents, 35% teacher consent that they sometimes follow the teacher's guide; whereas 65% teacher don't follow teaching process instructed by the teacher guide. 19% teacher consent they know the aims, objectives of primary level; whereas 81% teacher do not know the aims, objectives of primary level. 54% participated in training for professional development; on the contrary 46% didn't take any professional development training. 21% teacher have taken training to teach English; whereas it is horrified found that 79% teacher have not taken any training to teach English. 31% consent that they teach after making lesson plan; whereas 69% consent that they don't make lesson plan to teach. 64% teacher consent that they give lesson in the class in Bangla language, 8% consent that they give class by using English and 28% consent that they use both Bangla and English. 6% teacher always use teaching aid to teach English; while 42% often use teaching aids and 52% never use teaching aids to teach English.

Table 03: Classroom observation checklist

Statement	Scale				
	Excellent	Good	Average	Bellow	Unable
Class room management	3	9	38	40	10
Students' motivation towards	–		30	62	8
Learners' participation in	–	5	10	85	–
Teachers' in-depth knowledge	–	11	19	60	–
Classroom learning	–	–	28	72	–
Time management	4	21	33	26	16
Technique of evaluation	6	22	14	27	31
Ways of giving feedback	2	18	26	23	31

Source: Field visit, March, 2012

From the observation of classroom, it was found that 3% teachers are excellent in terms of classroom management, 9% teachers are good in terms of classroom management, 38% are in average performance, and 40% are in below average conditions; whereas 10% teachers are totally unable in terms of classroom management. 30% teachers are in average condition in terms of students' motivation towards learning which is measured on the basis of using various ways of giving motivation, 62% are in below average means they try little bit to motivate their students; while 8% teachers don't have any intension to teach students perfectly and they don't try to motivate students towards learning. 5% learners are good in terms of learner's participation in the classroom activities, 10% are in average and 85% are in below average which focus that students are inactive to the classroom, as a result they can't learn properly. 11% teacher have good depth knowledge of subject matter, 19% have average in depth knowledge and 60% are in below average which focus that most of the teachers are not good at English language, as a result they can't teach properly. 28% school have average classroom learning environment, 72% have below average classroom learning environment. 4% teachers are excellent in time management; while 21% teacher are good in time management, 33% are in average in time management, 26% teachers are below average in time management and 16% teachers do not maintain any time schedule which affects students learning. 6% teachers followed excellent evaluation technique and 22% teachers are good in using technique of evaluation, 14% are in average, 27% are in below average and 31% are totally unable to use technique of evaluation, as a result they can't evaluate students learning. 2% teacher's have excellent feedback ability; while 18% have good feedback ability and 26% average skill to give appropriate feedback, 23% are in below average and 31% teacher's have no skills or do not give feedback to the students learning.

Findings and Discussion

In this study, it is found that the subject of English language seems to be a terrifying subject for the students of the primary schools, although most of the students try to read English regularly. In Bangladesh, the primary schools are located in rural and urban areas and the schools of both sides are deprived of modern facilities for learning. As a result, it directly affects students' English learning. English seems to be obscure language to the students because teachers do not use any joyful learning strategy. Thus most of the primary students are not able to make good result in English. It is found that almost all school authorities do not emphasize in English learning and provide schools with teaching-learning materials. They also do not negotiate with higher authority about prevailing problems of English language learning. Most of the teachers complain that they donot get support of having teaching-learning materials and training from school authority. School authorities are always busy to get money for themselves and they give concentration rarely to school welfare. It is one of the main challenges of implementing English curriculum at the primary schools for which teachers cannot use effective methodology in class room and that is liable to poor proficiency in English language in rural areas. It is found that most of the teachers have no training about English teaching. In teaching, training participation for professional skill development helps teacher to enrich their knowledge about teaching methodology, using teaching materials, accurate evaluation system, management etc. English teaching mostly depends on training but many teachers do not have English language teaching training. Although primary teachers are expected to teach English as a compulsory subject from class one, there is no ELT provision in PTIs (Primary Training Institute). It is found that most of the teachers of primary schools donot take training to teach English and for that reason they do not know how to teach students effectively. It is found that all teachers use only lecture method and they do not have any knowledge of modern language learning methods and techniques. It is a pressing matter to implement English curriculum at the primary schools for which English turns out to be dull and difficult subject to the students. Teacher's guide is an important instructional material. It helps teacher to follow proper teaching methods and conduct classroom activities perfectly as desired in the curriculum document. Large number of teachers cannot follow the teacher's guide because the Government does not provide them which were also claimed by the teachers of this study. In this research, it is found that most of the teachers do not know about teacher's guide, although very few teachers heard about the guide. It is also a matter of concern in implementing English curriculum at the primary schools. Curriculum is the heart of education system which indicates the education aims, objectives and learning outcomes. It helps teacher to conduct their teaching in classroom .To implement English language curriculum at the primary level, teachers' knowledge about the aims, objectives of English curriculum is very essential. However this research found that most of the primary school teachers are not aware of the aims, objectives of English curriculum. When most of the teachers do not know the English curriculum, aims and objectives, it becomes tough to achieve the expected curriculum goal which is one of main hindrances for implementing curriculum. Due to this lacking of curriculum knowledge, teachers become unable to conduct English language class in a proper way and this may affect students' English language proficiency. Lesson plan is the preparatory teaching-learning materials which facilitate teachers to conduct classes effectively. To implement English curriculum and preparing lesson plan is very indispensable. It has also been explored that very few teachers know how it should be made and most of the teachers thought a lesson plan is just the list of topics or subtopics that they will teach in the classes.

It is found in this research that most of the teachers complain that they take minimum eight classes on average in a day, as a result they cannot get time to make lesson plan. It is also a barrier of implementing English language curriculum at the primary schools because teachers may fail to conduct English language class in full swing by considering class time, lesson and students' demand which may affect students' English learning. A stimulating atmosphere for language teaching can be created by displaying posters, charts, maps, advertisements, timetables and signs together with works produced by the students themselves in the classroom. In fact teaching aids that can be used in language class are enormous and their use would be suitable and appropriate to the students needs. But it has been found that most of the teachers do not use necessary teaching aids and instructional materials except chalk and duster. Teaching aids and instructional materials are very important to motivate students towards learning and to capture the English content knowledge easily. To make the students free from fear of English language learning, use of teaching aids and instructional materials is very important. For the negligence of using teaching aids and instructional materials by the teachers, the students do not get attraction to learn English which is concerning matter for implementing English curriculum at the primary schools and it may be a reason for the weakness at English language to them. Continuous assessment throughout the academic year is fundamental factor to any proper evaluation system. Essentially, this means that the students should only move on to any new item, when the previous one has been sufficiently understood. Of course, every new item should be sufficiently recycled for better understanding and for that the students get mastery over that. Continuous assessment system and giving feedback are essential to judge students achievement, weakness and emancipation of weakness in any subject. It is found in this research that most of the teachers are not aware of such assessment system and as a result the students' performance about their proficiency level of English language cannot be examined. The main goal of English language teaching at the primary level is that the students will understand simple instructions in English and carry them out. But unfortunately there is no practice of listening activities in the classroom. It is found that not a single school has any listening lab. Lack of language lab or listening instrument might cause the students not to have the proper opportunity to practice English listening. Without listening practice of English language, perfect pronunciation and speaking style cannot be developed. It is the hindrance of English language curriculum implementation at the primary schools. It is found in this research that most of the teachers rarely make speaking practice while they sometimes make reading and writing practice. Most of the primary teachers' speaking skill is not good and as a result they do not make speaking practice in the class. Almost all the primary school teachers conduct English language class by using Bangla language. Although they try to make writing and reading practice in English sometimes, the ways of making writing and reading practice is still questionable because they do not know the proper way of making practice of these skills.

It is a big concern that many teachers cannot write a piece of text of their own. They hardly listen to any English TV program. They rarely use English to communicate with their students in English classes. They rarely read any English newspaper or any book written in English. While teaching, these teachers strive more on how far they can ensure that their students can cut good marks in their examinations. Lack of adequate English teachers in the schools is also concerning matter for which teachers of other subjects have to give the English classes but they don't have in-depth knowledge in English. In both categories of Government and non-Government primary schools, there are no sufficient English language teachers. Thus, English subject based teacher recruitment in primary schools should be preferred as a prior issue which can enhance the English language learning at the primary level schools in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The facts, knowledge and theory presented above reveal that the advantages of an early beginning of second language teaching do not apply when qualified teachers and exposure to a language environment do not exist. Language skill development based on the mother language, which is also important for cognitive development of the child, must be ensured in the primary school, especially in the early grades. With very limited contact time for learners, building the foundation of mother tongue and mathematics deserves high priority in grades 1 to 3. Such a foundation of cognitive and linguistic development is essential for effective learning of a second language. English in the curriculum in these grades in the prevailing condition have three undesirable effects: *First*, children do not learn English and waste their precious time; *secondly*, an important slice of time is taken away from teaching Bangla and Math, which is necessary to build the foundation of cognitive and linguistic skills; and *thirdly*, children may have to unlearn the bad phonetics and grammar that they are taught. In the Bangladesh circumstances, a realistic and pedagogically defensible approach would be to introduce English in grades four and five with a designated teacher of English in each primary school who can be supported with training, learning materials and incentives. The curriculum objectives for English at the primary level can be achieved within this time, if necessary attention is given to quality of instruction and teacher support. Actions will be needed on teaching personnel management, learning aids and facilities, and curricular content and structure. A bilingual approach in Bangladesh with both Bangla and English recognized as important educational, business and public affairs languages can be seen as a longer term goal. However, as an early step, at least in some educational institutions, both English and Bangla medium, endowed with adequate resources, a bi-lingual approach can be tried out. Such trials can pave the ground for wider practice of bi-lingualism in the education system. The conclusions derived from what we know about child development, language learning and the realities of primary education should be the basis for considering and deciding the next steps in teaching English in the primary schools.



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