

Classroom Practices in Teaching English at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

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1. Abstract

This paper looks at the difficulties in teaching and learning situation of English at tertiary level in Bangladesh. The aim of this study was to find out after having 12 years of compulsory English learning at primary and secondary levels why the students still find it difficult to use the language satisfactorily while pursuing higher studies. The article reviews the literature describing both Grammar Translation Method and Communicative Approach in order to explain the ways of teaching and learning. The respondents consisted of students and teachers from both public and private universities. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews and observation of classes. After analyzing the responses of both teachers and students it is found there are problems with implementation of proper methodology due to lack of awareness and training of the teachers, lack of logistics, shortage of time which ultimately results in students' low motivation. The paper ends in suggesting ways which may be implemented inside the classroom to improve the English learning situation.

2. Introduction

Teacher-fronted lecture mode where the transfer of knowledge is unidirectional, i.e. from the teacher to the learner, is the most popular classroom practice in Bangladesh, even in the case of language teaching. The classes are sometimes so large that the preoccupation is whether those at the back can hear rather than on lesson content [Raynor, 1995]. Teacher-fronted lecture mode makes sense in classes of other subjects, but it does not help the students of language because one way pedagogy does not create any opportunity for the learners to negotiate or initiate their own learning, ultimately resulting in learner's incapability to interact/communicate in the target language. At tertiary level in Bangladesh, lecturing mode is still regarded as appropriate [Raynor, 1995]. Rather than language as a tool, language as a code bias is reflected in the examinations as well as teaching methodologies that are followed.

Considering the importance of a second language, English at tertiary level in Bangladesh has been reintroduced. The main library language for most subjects is English. The

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representation of academic knowledge at this level becomes language based, requiring use of specialized lexis with complex structures to represent abstract concept with exactitude. Besides, English is considered the gateway of success in Bangladesh. Many students with brilliant academic results but with problems in communicating in English cannot become successful in their career. Most of the universities have well planned curriculum for language teaching but due to several reasons there is hardly any implementation of it. As a result, the English Language teachers and students are going through a difficult time.

3. Background of Teaching English in Bangladesh

“English has historically been taught ‘as a compulsory school subject in Bangladesh for over 150 years...’ [Rahman, 1997: 191]. Students learn English from their primary school level till the end of their pre-university schooling. To get a white collar job, proficiency in an international language, i.e. English, is a must as it is a key that can open the door of knowledge to the students because almost all the books for higher studies are in English. Moreover, only learning a foreign language can give one a share of economic and social power in today’s world.

The overall scenario of English language teaching and learning in the country is very unsatisfactory. Even though it is evident that English is essential for our survival, our graduate, except a very few, fail to acquire communicative competence. Nevertheless, some of them are good in reading and writing skills but when it comes to listening and speaking the situation worsens.

In a study undertaken by the British Council on behalf of the University Grants Commission, Bangladesh [Raynor,1995] it was found that the competence level of the most students entering universities is about band 3 on English speaking union scale, where as target competence level is around band 6 or 7.

Raynor [1995] states that a gap of this would take a training course of at least 600 hours to fill. This is not feasible in the present circumstances. The target competence level conforms to international standard and should not be compromised at any cost. If the time needed to meet the target is reduced at the tertiary level then it should be increased in the entry level.

Many factors are held responsible for this situation of English in Bangladesh, some of which are:

i) Educational Infrastructure

Predominantly Bangladesh is a rural country where a very low percentage of the people receive urban educational facilities. Besides, most of the classes are large in size where teachers teach English only by giving lectures like any other subject. This creates a marked difference in the quality of learning.

The difference in education at the school level leads to difference in the learners' ability to understand and produce a satisfactory level of language at tertiary level. Learners who have the experience of more academic use of English start with an advantage over others.

ii) The Teaching Methodologies

Grammar translation method dominated European and foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s and in modified form it continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today [Richards and Rodgers, 2001]. In Bangladesh, only recently newly revised textbooks have been introduced in secondary and higher secondary levels, where lessons are designed to follow the communicative approach. The teachers, being followers of grammar translation method most of their lives, face problems in teaching in the new method putting the students in more troubles. Perhaps, this is one of the major reasons in the pathetic achievement of English teaching and learning situation in Bangladesh.

iii) Materials

In Bangladesh, textbooks are generally the only teaching and learning guide. Here, textbooks are centrally developed by the textbook board. Unlike developed countries teachers do not have any freedom to pick and choose any English language textbooks or materials. Besides, majority of our teachers are not adequately trained in education science, so they depend solely on the textbooks. On the other hand, most of our students suffer from financial insolvency; therefore, they cannot afford to buy any book other than the prescribed textbooks.

iv) Examination System

The traditional examination system is also responsible for too much dependency on textbooks. The questions that students get in the examination are mainly from the prescribed books. Hence, students memorize the answers in order to pass as the marks obtained in the examination open their gate-way to higher education at tertiary level. To most of the students learning English means memorizing grammar rules as the questions they get in the examination mostly focus on grammar.

4. Literature Survey

English teaching in Bangladesh has largely followed grammar translation method. The demand for proficiency in English has given rise to many different methodologies. Among them Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach is widely followed throughout the world. In Bangladesh also, this methodology has been introduced in the recent past bringing changes in the textbooks. Unlike grammar translation method this method gives emphasis on four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) of language through the opportunity to learn in a more practical way.

Let us now look at the insights of some of the linguists on these two methods.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001) Grammar Translation Method is a way of studying a language that approaches the language first, through detailed analysis of its grammar rules, followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language. This methodology views language learning as consisting of little more than memorizing rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the target language. Reading and writing are the major focus; little or no systematic attention is paid to speaking or listening. Grammar is taught deductively, i.e. by presentation and study of grammar rules, which are then practiced through translation exercises.

According to Holliday (1994) in the Communicative Approach, the learner is no longer an empty receptacle who must learn a language by means of a new set of stimulus-response behaviour traits, but an intelligent, problem-solving person, with an existing communicative competence in a first, or perhaps second or third language. The student therefore brings to the classroom experience and knowledge which is of value to the learning process. The student can thus no longer be seen as an empty vessel which a teacher can arbitrarily fill with new knowledge or behavior, as was the tendency of grammar-translation and direct and structural or audio-lingual approaches. This is not to say, however, that grammar, structures and patterns of language behavior can no longer be taught, but they will be taught more liberally, with more respect for the individual within the communicative approach.

For some, CLT means little more than an integration of grammatical and functional teaching. Littlewood (1981: 1) states, "One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language." For others it means using procedures where learners work in pairs or groups employing available language resources in problem-solving tasks. One of its North American proponents, Savignon (1993), for example, offers as a precedent to CLT a commentary by Montaigne on his learning of Latin through conversation rather than through customary method of formal analysis and translation. Montaigne writes "Without methods, without a book, without grammar rules, without whip and without tears, I had learned Latin as proper as that of my school master." [Savignon, 1983, in Richards and Rodgers, 1995, p.47].

5. Research Questions

1. What are the difficulties in teaching and learning situation of English at tertiary level in Bangladesh?
2. Why do the students still find it difficult to use the language satisfactorily while pursuing higher studies even after having 12 years of compulsory English learning at primary and secondary levels?

6. Research Methodology

This research provides data of teachers and students from two public and six private universities of Bangladesh.

The methodology of this research paper consists of the following steps:

- a. Questionnaire
- b. Interview with students and teachers
- c. Observation

7. Participants

As a part of research the researchers collected data from two public and six private universities of Bangladesh. The participants of this study were 20 teachers and 100 students. These English teacher-participants were all faculty members at these public and private universities, with their language teaching experience ranging from two years to twenty years.

8. Findings and Discussion

To find out the reasons behind the poor condition of English Language at tertiary level we observed some classes in both public and private universities. We also interviewed teachers and students of these institutions. Our principal aim was to find out what was actually going on in English Language classrooms at tertiary level. Below are the findings which were collected from teachers and students through questionnaires.

Table 1: Distribution of responses of teachers

1.	What skills do you teach in the class?	All skills 70%	Reading, writing, grammar 30%		
2	How do the students practice reading?	Read aloud 35%	Read silently 40%	Read with peers and in groups 25%	
3.	Do you take feed back after the students finish reading?	Frequently 90%	Sometimes 10%	Never 0%	
4.	How do the Ss practice writing?	Grammar exercise 20%	Free handwriting 30%	Home assignment 50%	None 0%
5.	Do you discuss Ss' problems after checking scripts?	Always 40%	Sometimes 60%	Never 0%	

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6.	How do the students practice listening?	Listen to teacher 25%	Cassette player 45%	Practice listening personally 10%	None 20%
7.	Do the students practice speaking?	Speak with teacher 30%	Speak with friends /peers in the class 40%	Speak out side class 10%	None 20%
8.	Do the students feel free to interact in the class?	All of them 25%	Most of them 35%	Few of them 40%	None 0%
9.	How do you teach Grammar?	Explain rules & give exercises 70%	Explain rules only when mistakes are made 30%	None 0%	
10.	Are you always in a rush to finish syllabus?	Yes 95%	No 5%		

Table 2 : Distribution of responses of students

1.	What skills of the language do you practice in the class?	Reading writing and grammar 60%	All skills 30%	Grammar exercises & writing 10%	
2.	How do you practice reading?	Read aloud 35%	Read silently 50%	Read with peers 10%	Read in groups 5%
3.	Do you receive feed back after you finish reading?	Frequently 40%	Sometimes 20%	Never 30%	Always 10%
4.	How do you practice writing?	Grammar exercise 40%	Free handwriting 15%	Home assignment 45%	None 0%
5.	Does your teacher discuss your problems after checking scripts?	Always 30%	Sometimes 20%	Never 50%	

6.	How do you practice listening?	Listen to teacher 45%	Cassette player 25%	Practice listening personally 10%	Never practices 20%
7.	How do you practice speaking?	Speak with teacher 30%	Speak with friends /peers in the class 40%	Speak out side class 20%	None 10%
8.	Do you feel free to interact in the class?	All of them 15%	Most of them 25%	Few of them 40%	None 20%
9.	How do you practice grammar?	Teacher explains rules & gives exercise 0%	Teacher explains rules only when frequent mistakes are made 20%	None 0%	
10.	Is your teacher always in rush to finish syllabus?	Yes 70%	No 20%	None 10%	

From our observations as well as data collected through questionnaires, issues that surfaced prominently as contributing factors for the dismal status of English at tertiary level were the followings:

- Inappropriate methodology
- Students' learning background
- Large classes
- Unavailability of logistics
- Ineffective syllabus
- Limitation of time
- Traditional examination system
- Lack of trained teachers

A) Inappropriate methodology

The classes we observed were mostly teacher-centered where students remained passive. In most of the classes the teachers were found to be delivering lectures and students taking notes. Since CLT approach is presently being recommended in language classrooms, in reality, the scope to follow CLT method is very limited because of the following reasons:

i) Students' learning background

In the pre-university level students learn English in a classroom where they have to cramp together with a large number of students often which can be 100-200+ students. Moreover, they do not get adequate resources, enough time in the class, most

importantly the teachers are untrained who follow inappropriate methodologies. Throughout the year, these students' only aim is to pass the examination with good marks. Those who are comparatively more intelligent or can afford to avail private tuition can achieve success in the exam (the success depends on how much marks they get in English, even if they cannot communicate fluently). These students are the ones who take admission at these universities and they expect the same kind of learning situation. If CLT is followed, most of these students take a long time to get over their inhibition in order to be active participants of the approach. By the time they get used to the CLT approach, the course finishes, as a result they fail to get the benefit of the method.

ii) Large classes

Most of the classes in our universities are large. According to Cross (1995) a large class is one whose size daunts the teachers and which he or she feels obliged to dominate in order to maintain control. Most of the classes we observed in public universities have 100+ students and number in private universities ranges from 25-60. Since time allotted for these English classes are not enough, often teachers fail to communicate with every student in the class. Communication is established only with those who remain in the 'action zone' [Shamim, 1992, in Bailey, K.B. and Nunan, D. 1994], i.e. the area where more active students sit together in the class. As a result, the teachers follow one way pedagogy where many students remain unnoticed with their problems.

iii) Ineffective syllabus

To Follow the CLT approach the syllabus must contain topics/situations which give scope to practice the language in real-life like situation, but we have found that many of these universities have syllabus which conform to CLT method, but in reality due to lack of training of the teachers the syllabus remains ineffective as most teachers fail to create an environment inside the classroom where these topics can be practiced following the CLT method. As a result they end in giving lectures on rules of grammar, give students grammar exercises to practice, and the questions in the examinations also focus on grammar topics. Finally, students again end up with rote learning to pass in the examination without developing communicative competence.

iv) Shortage of time

These English courses are offered at these universities along with major subjects of the respective disciplines. The time allotted for English classes are 2-4 hours per week, which is not enough to practice the language in an appropriate manner. Moreover, students do not communicate in English outside the classrooms. It is reported by the students that though the medium of instructions in all of these universities is English, but many teachers of their respective departments deliver lecture in their first language, hence students do not feel the urge to communicate in English. Less time in the class and low motivation to use the target language outside the classroom, results in less time for practicing the language.

v) Unavailability of logistics

In order to follow the CLT approach, the set up in the classroom is very important. Most of the time the classes do not have proper seating arrangements or adequate space to move around. So the students remain seated at a fixed place which makes it difficult for them to communicate with others or work in groups. Very few of these universities have 'Listening Skill' in their syllabus, but often there is no provision for cassette player or multi-media, which are a common need for communicative language classrooms.

vi) Lack of trained teachers

In Bangladesh there is a high demand of 'good' English Language teachers. A 'good' language teacher in Bangladesh is someone who has a good academic background with high marks, often with 1st class and can communicate in English satisfactorily. People with these qualifications are given employment at these universities. But the fact, whether these people are appropriately trained in language teaching, gets less priority. Hence, these teachers face a lot of problems while teaching. Quite often many of these teachers were students of English Literature; they do not have the knowledge of appropriate methodologies for language classrooms.

9. Pedagogical Implications

This study was conducted to make the language teachers aware of the problems in language classrooms so that teaching could aim at resolving some of these problems. Below are some suggestions, which may be considered while teaching a language class.

Firstly, the needs of our students have to be identified. Since a teacher has to play the role of a 'needs analyst', Tomlinson (1998). It is the primary responsibility of the teacher to find out why the students have come to learn the language and what they need to be taught. Before making a course outline the teachers need to remember that all these students have already had 12 years of English learning, and have learnt a lot of grammar rules in the pre-university levels. According to Masuhara [cited in Tomlinson, 1998], 'needs' seem to be defined in terms of: a) ownership (whose needs are they?), b) kinds (what kinds of needs are identified?), c) sources (what are the sources for the need?)

Therefore, it is important to find out whether the course outline needs to contain grammar topics and simple exercises, which the students have been mostly doing in their schools or they should apply the already acquired grammar knowledge by practicing the target language. Teachers as well as students must realize that memorizing grammar rules does not always help learn a language, therefore their focus should always be towards practicing the language using whatever grammar knowledge they have acquired, rather than finishing the syllabus for the examination purpose.

Secondly, enough time needs to be allotted to the English Language course offered at universities. Students before going into the core courses need to attend the English classes only as they need to be free from the pressure and worries of the major subjects, rather concentrate only on language learning. Also, the number of teachers and space need to be increased in order to have classes with small number of students. It is often found that due to the shortage of teachers and rooms, the available teachers have to

allow a large number of students into their classes. If the teacher-student ratio is appropriate, learning will be conducive. As the number of students at tertiary level is less than the number in primary and secondary level, with a little effort from the authority this situation may be improved.

Thirdly, the classrooms need to have a suitable seating arrangement, which may help students hold on to their motivation. There needs to be enough space for movement of the teacher as well as students. If the teacher always has to stand in front of the class, the attention always remains focused on the 'action zone'. Hence, the teacher loses the personal attachment with the students sitting at the back.

Fourthly, students need to have access to useful resources. The library must contain useful/attractive books, which will make students interested to learn through them. Self access study places have to be set up where students can have self and easy access. Teachers need to encourage students to communicate in English outside the classroom. Students need to be aware of the fact that unless the grammar rules learnt in the classrooms are applied in practical use of the language outside, successful language learning would never take place.

Finally, teachers need to go through proper training programmes so that they are able to handle the classes effectively. Teacher's attitude needs to be changed and s/he needs to acquire the belief that s/he is no longer the sole authority in the class, but a facilitator who looks after the needs of the students. Teacher's changed attitude would help achieve professionalism.

10. Conclusion

Findings of this study in relation to current practice of ELT in Bangladesh demonstrate that many factors are responsible to create difficulties in teaching and learning situation of English at tertiary level in Bangladesh and still Bangladeshi teachers face difficulties in using and adopting appropriate methodologies according to the needs of learners. The study also focuses that CLT is in practice for quite some time in Bangladesh but still Bangladeshi teachers face difficulties in using and adopting CLT and they mainly persist traditional practices in classes. Our study suggests that we need to identify the needs of our students and act thereby as we should know that needs analysis with a view to identifying the level of learners is one of the preconditions of beginning any learning programme successfully.

The study also suggests that teacher training and teacher's awareness about the need to develop and keep up-to-date with teaching methods and ideas can contribute to the development of ELT in Bangladesh. The increasing demand for competent users of English in the era of globalization has had a significant impact on English Language Teaching (ELT) in Bangladesh. The country needs competent users of English to face the millennium challenge and there is no alternative to improve the quality of ELT.

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