

An Evaluation of English Language Teaching at the Beginner's Level in Bangladesh from the Psycholinguistic Point of View

Iffat A.N. Majid*

Abstract:

This paper looks at the teaching methods currently practiced in Bangladesh in both Bengali-medium and English-medium primary schools in order to ascertain how conducive it is for second language learning in the light of theories of second language acquisition. Opinions of parents/guardians and primary school teachers have been sought in this regard about the necessity and quality of teaching at this level.

Key words : Psycholinguistics, primary education, quality, teaching method.

Introduction

The question of whether a second language should be taught at a very early age has always been a controversial one so far teaching is concerned. In Bangladesh although the controversy has been resolved a long time back, it would be enlightening to consider some of the viewpoints of psycholinguists and language learning experts on the appropriate environment necessary for effective second language learning and the existing scenario of English language teaching at the entry level. This would be specially useful in ascertaining to what extent the required conditions are being met and if necessary what changes need to be introduced in order to make learning a second language motivating and worthwhile for the learners. The first part of this article therefore focuses on the psycholinguistic aspects and the second part deals with the study conducted on primary school teaching in Bangladesh which includes language teaching in all the existing three streams of education viz. Bengali-medium, English medium as well as Madrasas.

The Psycholinguistic viewpoint

According to some experts like Penfield and Roberts (1959)¹ the optimum age for learning a language is up to ten years. They base their assumptions on the fact that until the onset of puberty both the hemispheres of the brain are involved in the processing of language, thereby having a great deal of plasticity. They are of the opinion that after

* Associate Professor, Department of English, Institute of Modern Languages, University of Dhaka

¹ Ellis, R. (1985) Understanding Second Language Acquisition, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, p-107.

² Ibid

³ Jakobovits, L.A (1970), Foreign Language Learning: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of the Issue, Massachusetts, Newbury House Publishers, p-60

puberty this plasticity is lost as the language function gets lateralized in the left hemisphere resulting in more limited ability. Penfield and Roberts thus assume that a child has a much better ability to acquire a native-like ability of the target language as both hemispheres of the brain are involved in the process. Lenneberg (1967)² also provided support to this theory by studying cases of injury to the head. He found that adults with surgery on the left hemisphere of the brain showed language disorders ranging from partial to total or permanent linguistic disability, whereas children regained total linguistic ability after such operations on the left hemisphere. He therefore concluded that the language processing areas in the children and adult were different. However, these claims by Dr. Penfield and Lenneberg have been criticized as being more relevant to first language acquisition rather than to second language acquisition. Stern³ on the other hands provided a more relevant checklist summarizing a table of the advantages and disadvantages of early teaching of a foreign language. This table is as follows:

(1) Age of acquisition: before adolescence (ages 3- 10)

Advantages:

- i) accords with neurophysiology of the brain(?),
- ii) easiest and most effective(?)
- iii) natural, good pronunciation;
- iv) leaves richer memory traces for later expansion;
- v) longer time for language can be allowed.

Disadvantages:

- i) possible confusion with first language habits,
- ii) no conscious acquisition of language learning process,
- iii) time spent not commensurate with the results;

(2) Age of acquisition: at adolescence (ages 11 to school leaving)

Advantages:

- i) increased capacity to appreciate varied aspects of language and culture contacts
- ii) still sufficient time to attain high standard,
- iii) improved memory and higher level of intellectual growth:
- iv) first language skills well established hence, no confusion.

Disadvantages

- i) More laborious than early learning
- ii) Success demands tenacity;

- iii) self-consciousness;
- iv) possible refusal to memorize;
- v) experience has shown that poor results frequent;
- vi) already crowded curricula and specialization of studies.

(3) Age of acquisition: adulthood

Advantages:

- i) specificity of purpose;
- ii) good motivation added to reasons mentioned for adolescence;
- iii) greatest amount of learning in least amount of time;

Disadvantages

- i) not enough time;
- ii) other preoccupations;
- iii) irregularity of study;

An interesting aspect of this study are points 1.i., ii and iii. Point 1 assumes that the same factors that help development of L 1 would also be active in the development of L2. Point 1.ii assumes that teaching at this stage would be easiest and most effective, which can be understood better if we look at the disadvantages of 2, i.e. learning languages from ages 11 to school leaving. Point 1.i. talks about natural good pronunciation on the grounds that learners at this age are physiologically developing and have better abilities of imitating and pronouncing sounds that they hear. The question of effectiveness of learning draws our attention to methods employed in teaching the natural pronunciation (presumably native-like pronunciation). Krashen⁴ argued that for a learner to acquire a second language s/he must be exposed to the comprehensible input either in a naturalistic or in a classroom environment. Vygotsky and Feuerstein⁵ have emphasized the role of the mediator as a key factor in learning being effective. They consider the part played by the teacher as very significant in selecting and shaping, the language ability of the learner.

From the affective point of view, children are much less self-conscious than teenagers or adults. They are not shy about making mistakes or copying and as language learners fall into the category of 'risk-takers' by their ability to try out whatever they have heard and putting into practice different strategies for communicating in the target language. Moreover, language for them is essentially a means of communication and not a formal

⁴ Ellis, R. (1985) *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, p-233.

⁵ Jakobivits, L.A (1970), *Foreign Language Learning: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of the Issue*, Massachusetts, Newbury House Publishers, p-60

⁶ Krashen, S.B.; Dulay, H. (1982) *Language Two*, Oxford University Press, p-231

⁷ Ellis, R. (1985) *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, p-23.

system that needs to be studied. They have no socio-cultural inhibitions towards a second language as a language of *the other group* and not their own. All of the above mentioned factors viz.

- (a) risk-taking in language production
- (b) lack of shyness or self-consciousness
- (c) language seen as a means of communication
- (d) no prejudices against the target language;

are all elements that work positively towards language acquisition especially an L2. However there is a big 'if' attached to these factors. A second language can be learnt:

(a) from the naturalistic environment where the learner picks up the target language from the environment around him/her;

(b) from the formal environment where the target language is taught formally.

In both these above mentioned environments language learning can be effective only if:

- there is an environment with sufficient exposure to the target language;
- the exposure provides comprehensible input;
- the input is appropriate for the level of the learner.

According to Krashen (1982):

"The value of second language classes, lies not only in the grammar instruction but in the 'teacher talk' - the 'comprehensible Input'"⁷

Methodology of the study

English language is compulsory from class 1 in all primary schools in Bangladesh with an entry level age of six. As it is psycho-linguistically considered to be a good age for beginning to learn a second language, it remains to be seen what kind of learning environment is prevailing in the primary schools. The following study was carried out through semi-structured interviews of the sample groups mentioned below:

- 2 teachers of junior sections of 2 English-medium schools;
- guardians of students of 3 different Bengali-medium primary schools;
- guardians of students of 3 different English-medium primary schools;
- 3 private tutors of primary-level students;
- 2 teachers of Bengali-medium primary schools: one in the rural area and one in the urban area;
- one primary level Madrasa teacher;

The interviewees were asked:

- about the average size of the class;
- the method of teaching English in the class;
- whether learners needed help of private tutors in class 1;
- whether it was acceptable is them for children to learn another language at such a tender age.

Summary of responses and discussion

The study showed a sharp contrast between the learning environments and methods employed at the primary levels of Bengali-medium and English-medium schools. These will now be discussed in detail.

Class size management: the average class size of English-medium schools is usually restricted to between 20-25 students, while that of the other schools both in the urban and rural areas including the Madrasas is between 60-100 student (per class). A mixed-age level class would have its own class dynamics. The language teacher would need to be more careful of the needs and abilities of the younger members of the class both in terms of instruction in the class as well as assessment of their performance. Only one teacher managing a class of 60-70 six-year olds would be quite a daunting job let alone pay special attention to the younger and weaker ones.

Starting age: The learners in English-medium schools start from age 3+ in the playgroup. By the time they are 6 years old they have already had 2-3 years of exposure to the English language. The word exposure here implies that the learners not only hear their teachers reading out the names of things in English but are also spoken to in English for real communicative purposes. The learners in the other primary schools mostly start at age 6. However, there is a very interesting phenomenon noticeable in these schools. In the madrasas the age group of learners in class 1 ranges from 3-8 years. Guardians of the younger students send their wards to school not exactly for learning anything in particular but to develop in them a habit of going to school by following other children. Learning is therefore not their main goal. Most of these children stay in class 1 for more than a year and are therefore not really learning anything nor are their parents much interested in monitoring their learning. Teachers therefore have problems addressing learners of such varied age groups especially when the class size is from 60-100. In the rural areas, although the learners are officially supposed to start at age 6, the teachers were of the opinion that many children are actually much older because: they are so undernourished due to poverty that they look much smaller than their actual age;

- illiterate/semi-literate rural parents have difficulty telling the exact ages of their children as they do not have the habit of recording their dates of birth. (Most of them keep count of age by some significant natural calamity or socio-political event that is known to everybody in the community).

Teaching methods: Regarding teaching methods, the study found a sharp contrast between teaching at English-medium schools and at the Bengali-medium schools.

English-medium schools: In the learners who enter playgroup at age 3+ do not do much studying but actually learn through playing. For instance, they are shown a picture of an apple, then they colour the picture of an apple **red**. They are mostly engaged in colouring, drawing pictures, learning names of things, learning numbers etc., without actually resorting to formal studying. English is thus taught as a language with focus on

meaning. Although the teacher mostly communicates in Bengali s/he occasionally uses English in the form of foreigner talk, in order to acquaint the learner with the language. In KG 1, the learners are introduced to alphabets and words that start with those letters e.g. A for apple, B for boy etc. They also learn to read and write numbers with the help of picture books. Most of the studying in the class is done in English so that learners get a constant exposure to English as, a means of communication. Consequently by the time they are 6+ they are quite advanced in English. They are then introduced to the concepts of articles, plural forms etc. without formally teaching them grammar rules, but through pictures and use of the language e.g. *an* apple, *a* boy, *girl-girls*, *hen-hens* etc. they also start constructing meaningful simple sentences like *this is a book*, *that is a tree* etc. with the help of illustrated pictures. Spellings are also introduced to them by this age through phonetic practices like *bo*, *bi*, *ba* or words like *ball fall*, *or bat cat*, *rat* etc., thus enabling them to develop concepts of orthographic and phonemic relationships. The teacher also communicates with them in simple English in the class like *come here*, *don't talk*, *give me your homework*, etc., in order to engage them in real-life communicative English. This is done to convey meaning and develop teacher-student interaction in the target language. The learners are also encouraged to respond to the teacher in English. The learners thus get exposure to English as a means of communication and also as a means of understanding the world. As the class size is usually limited to an average of 20-25 students per class, the teacher can address the needs of individual students by giving regular feedback on their class work and homework. The learners also usually enjoy learning at school as they are playing and learning at the same time by doing other types of creative activities as well, such as, producing different kinds of simple handicrafts.

In Bengali-medium schools: In Bengali-medium schools and madrasa on other hand, learners start schooling at 6+ years learning both English and Bengali at the same time. As the classes are very large (60 – 100) the teachers use alphabet charts with pictures and the learners read out the alphabets in unison. In most cases after initial practice, the teacher singles out the most capable learners who then replace the teacher in reading out the alphabets or words and the class mechanically follows the drills. Some parents complain that the teachers take this opportunity to sit together and chat during these drills. One private tutor complained that the student of a reputed Bengali-medium school constantly had problems copying what the teacher wrote on the board as he was slow in writing and the teacher was not bothered about checking if all the learners could manage copying from the blackboard. The guardian repeatedly tried to talk to the teacher but the teacher was not approachable at all. The guardian was told to herself copy the lessons regularly from other learners who could manage better. In private Bengali-medium schools, the teachers are more under pressure to show teaching outcome than in government schools as there is much more monitoring and accountability involved. As these schools charge more money, they are also to some extent under pressure from guardians as well. However, some reputed private schools admit students through selection tests and then start English at a more advanced level –not exactly with alphabets but with simple sentences, and elementary level grammar like singular/plural

forms, gender, etc. Often grammar translation method is used to translate English sentences into Bengali, like – *'This is my book'*. The learners at these schools are thus not exactly at the beginners level but rather the post beginners level as they have already learnt the alphabets and some words using help at private levels in order to do well in the admission tests and gain the edge over the other students.

In the rural areas the picture is no better. As the private schools in small towns and rural areas charge more fees, learners in these schools are from financially solvent families. Consequently these children get more support from their parents in the form of private tutors or extra books, etc. The worst sufferers are children of government primary schools, as reported by a teacher who had previously worked in a government school in a small town. She reported that as children in the village come from poor, uneducated families, the only exposure they have to English is only in the classroom. So their learning is solely limited to what is being done in the class. They are not usually given any homework as there is usually no one to help them at home. Moreover in class 1 their learning is in most cases limited to identifying and pronouncing alphabets on the alphabet charts only, and identifying letters from a jumbled list of alphabets. Although in most rural primary schools the number of enrolled students per class may be more than 80, the number of absentees could be higher than 50% as there is no penalty for absenteeism. Consequently these children lag far behind the children who are more fortunate to be in private primary schools that are usually located in the town areas. In any case, irrespective of whether the school is located in the rural or urban area, any kind of meaningful interaction in English is totally absent in Bengali-medium primary level English classes.

Attitudes of Parents and Guardians towards the starting age

As the picture presented so far illustrates a rather grim picture of English language classes at the Bengali-medium primary schools, parents and guardians were interviewed for their opinions as to the appropriacy of their wards learning English at this early age. Surprisingly although the majority of the guardians admitted that what they were doing in schools was nothing but rote-learning and memorizing alphabets, the majority of them considered class I to be the right age as they thought that learning a new language at an early age would help them learn faster. Moreover, some of them were of the opinion that introducing English at higher levels would put extra burden on their wards as syllabuses of other subjects start getting larger from class II but in class I learners have fewer things to study. However, an interesting phenomenon of these primary schools is that due to very little individual care given during school hours, most of these children are heavily dependant on supplementary teaching being done at home either by the parents or the private tutors. For children of poor families with illiterate parents the school is their only source of exposure to English which as described earlier, is not only at a very superficial level but also of very poor quality. Consequently these learners suffer greatly at higher levels due to very weak foundations in English that they get at the elementary level.

Conclusion

From the above discussion and study it appears that in case of Bengali-medium primary schools as well as Madrasas, one needs to rethink the utility of making the learners go through a process that has hardly any benefits. From the psycholinguistic viewpoint, unless the learners get sufficient exposure to the target language and of the right nature, the learners will pick up not only faulty pronunciation but also faulty notions of the language from insufficient or bad teaching. This is because the picture does not get any better in case of classes 11, 111, and so on. Moreover socio-linguistically, for poor rural parents learning English is important only instrumentally, in order to pass exams. There is no element of integrative motivation working at this level. Perhaps the policy-makers need to seriously rethink the idea of introducing English from the primary level countrywide considering the available logistic support and quality of existing primary level English teachers across the country. Introducing English from the very beginning of their educational career implies that the policy makers are aiming at Bilingualism to compete with the current global scenario. But how much are we really achieving? A few successful English-medium schools at the urban level are certainly not the answer but they are a good example of how much can really be achieved if teaching is done in the proper way. Unfortunately, with the current nature and quality of English language teaching at the primary level, the possibility of success appears really bleak. The words of Jakobovits are worth quoting in this context:

"The question of when FL's (Foreign Languages) are to be taught within our educational system is a complex problem that involves political, social, philosophical considerations and should not be reduced to a matter of neurophysiology. Since the sociopolitical context varies from place to place, not only on the international plane but also within a particular country, the decision must be considered by each school district in the light or conditions that prevail within its geographic boundary. The knowledge that has accumulated in this matter indicates that there are both advantages and disadvantages to FL study at any age compared to any other age. Generalizations about the optimum age that fail to take context into account are almost certainly to be false."⁸

Hence, policy makers in Bangladesh really need to rethink to what extent introducing English at the primary level is of any real use when it is being handled by teachers who have very little notion of appropriate methods of teaching let alone the psycholinguistic aspect of it.

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