

IMPORTANT TOPICS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN BANGLADESH

Following is a discussion on my take on the status of language policy in Bangladesh, my thoughts on the role of the Bangla Academy being sufficient and helpful for the citizens of Bangladesh. I have also discussed what socio-political challenges I think the Academy faces in its functioning.

Unfortunately, the Language Education Policy (LEP) of Bangladesh is implicit and not explicitly comprehensive, and it provides a good case to illustrate a few ideological issues behind the policy, to what extent it reflects to practices, the case of the LEP in terms of language rights and language use, and the extent to which the nature of the LEP has followed democratic practices, etc. This nature of LEP has given rise to a number of problems in the academic system of Bangladesh. One good example of this issue in Bangladesh is that there is no unified teaching system, especially in terms of language use catered for the different languages, curriculums, and mediums of education in Bangladesh.

The Bangla Academy is the national language authority of Bangladesh. That being said, the role of Bangla Academy is not sufficient or helpful enough for the citizens of Bangladesh. It may be helpful for Bangla language speakers, but citizens of Bangladesh with different mother tongues, most of them who are indigenous, are deprived of language rights and privileges. There are four divisions of the Academy: Research, Translation, Compilation, Publication and Library. Some of the divisions are very active with exceptional developments being brought in the past few years, but it lacks structural and practical reliability on compilation and training.

In Bangladesh, thirty thousand indigenous people are deprived of their mother tongue, as their languages have no official or academic purposes, and as there is no written form (except Chakma, Khashia and Murong) and they are under the threat of endangerment. The indigenous groups of Bangladesh live in vulnerable conditions and are deprived of many basic human rights. Article 28 of the UNHCR recognizes the right for children to education that is free and compulsory, and Article 30 is to protect cultural and language rights of adivasi children. After about two decades of signing the rule, they have finally began to initiate and execute the rule (Rule 33-kha/2) underlined: “Education through mother language”, where the message is only education can enrich the lives of indigenous people. Only recently, textbooks are being printed in some indigenous languages.

Bangla and English are considered as dominating languages by the indigenous communities, and it has caused identity crisis and major drop-out in indigenous communities. Here problems mainly arise from the implicit language education policy of this country. A close observation of the situation reveals that policy decisions have largely suffered with changed of government and the country still lacks clear goals with regard to a foreign language teaching policy and indigenous and rural education policy of Bangladesh. LEP of Bangladesh expresses the need of learning the national language Bangla and English as a compulsory subject from grades 1 to 12. But it did not state any policy about the indigenous children whose mother tongue is neither Bangla nor English and there is no consideration for regional, heritage, indigenous or community languages that represent a significant portion of the population. The LEP of Bangladesh may be a significant reason behind the major drop-out rates of indigenous children because using a language that is not their first language as their medium of instruction in schools obviously seems alien to them. This linguistic insecurity might lead them to face an identity crisis and is the reason for leaving school before even finishing the primary level of education. “Linguistic Insecurity” derived by Labov (1972) states that there are some people who are socially subordinate and think that their language is inferior to other languages (mostly dominating ones), and they speak badly, becomes an obstacle for their linguistic development.

Some of the ways in which collaboration can be increased between English language teachers in the rural area and those in the capital of Bangladesh. My thoughts on the initiative that should be taken by the government.

Although the issues regarding considerable differences among English language teachers in the rural area and those in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, had been recognized a long time ago, it has not yet been addressed with enough urgency where it could undergo the modification it badly needs. Some of the ways in which collaboration can be increased between English language teachers in the rural area and those in the capital of Bangladesh may include conventional teacher trainings and workshops, webinars, online teachers trainings and workshops, digital classrooms (Adobe Classrooms, Skype Classrooms, video conference sessions), and resource operation, utilization and management training.

Similar to collaborating English language teachers in rural areas and those in Dhaka, the government should also collaborate with private/non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The government can essentially handle the work but if it

continues to work in its usual manner and pace, the required goals may not be met even in the next 2-3 decades. It is definitely not an easy task; but with systematic modification, regulation, implementation, resources, training, and monitoring, even such overwhelming goals can be accomplished. The government has enough fund and resources; what it lacks is real field experience where they can essentially implement the policy. This is where NGOs come into action. They have been working on such projects for many years in Bangladesh and have been successful in their attempts. The reason to why NGOs have not made a huge difference is because they have not been able to reach noteworthy number of teachers from rural areas. International organizations and NGOs such as iEARN-BD, YES Alumni Association, 1Degree Initiative, Volunteer for Bangladesh, etc. have arranged numerous teacher trainings and workshops where teachers from rural areas have been trained by both local (Dhaka) and foreign English language teaching professionals to better facilitate English language teaching in their classrooms. Even if those teachers wanted to practice the newly learnt skills and techniques in their classrooms, they had failed due to the lack of resources. This issue can only be solved by the government, and by collaborating with NGOs, the change can be made quicker and with longer lasting response and productivity.

The goals should be simple. Firstly, teachers should undergo two individual trainings: English language training, and English language teaching training. Knowing what to teach and how to teach it correctly should be two of the main goals. Then the teachers should know how to teach English language in the classroom using interesting, relevant and current approach, methods, tasks, activities, etc. while staying within the curriculum approved by the language policy of Bangladesh. And finally, by having a clear understanding of the curriculum, they can made necessary changes to facilitate better language teaching in the classroom. As a result, teachers from both Dhaka and the rural areas can stay in touch, stay updated, and continue collaborating to enable improved English language teaching.

My understanding on why Bangladeshi learners under the mainstream education do badly in English.

Bangladeshi national education consists of two mainstream curriculum: Bangla medium, and Arabic medium. English medium is the third curriculum that has established itself as an alternative to mainstream education due to globalization of the English language. By mainstream education, it is usually referred to Bangla medium schools in Bangladeshi context. These schools have differing tuition fees among the institution, meaning that Bangla medium schools are usually cheaper. Since this information is widely known, in addition to the differences in uniform, location of classrooms, organization and orientation of classrooms, teachers, resources, etc., it is easy to distinguish and discriminate one medium from the other. English medium schooling has somewhat been a privilege for the wealthy families, but this has been changing because the number of English medium schools has exploded in the last two decade.

In the mainstream institutional contexts of Bangladesh, students do not have much scope to practice English outside their classrooms, most times not even inside classrooms. The lessons and activities that are done in class are not enough to help them learn English proficiently, especially speaking and listening. Although English is a compulsory subject from the primary to the higher secondary level of education, students are not necessarily exposed to opportunities for speaking English. As a result, many students only possess passable oral and listening skills in English. It is generally assumed that shyness, pronunciation difficulty, inadequate knowledge of grammar and/or inappropriate use of vocabulary items badly affect the learners' communication skills. In the mainstream education, some emphasis is put on reading and writing skills of English to cope with the demands of higher education. In recent times, both oral and written English communication skills are being emphasized because of the growing needs of effective international exchanges in the context of a globalized world.

The present English teaching and learning situation in the country gives rise to serious concerns that it needs to be readdressed with a better academic and professional outlook, an outlook that is pragmatic and context-sensitive in order to address the problems of both oral and written communication. Furthermore, cross-cultural understanding among speakers of English all around (native and non-native) the world needs to be developed so that it can promote mutual understanding in communication.

Strategies that can help change this situation is by remodeling English language pedagogy in Bangla medium schools and assessment policy. In order to produce proficient English learners, the teaching methodology should be readdressed. The methodology should be based on eclectic approaches, using a combination of language-centered, skill-centered, and learning-centered approach. In addition to this, the syllabus should be revisited too. Instead of product-based syllabus, process-based syllabus will result in a very effective learning experience. And finally, the progress of learners should be assessed using formative assessment, which would summarize the participants' development at a particular time. Formative assessment should be chosen over summative assessment (or summative evaluation) because summative assessment refers to the assessment of participants where the focus is on the outcome of a program, not on individual linguistic skills.