

TEACHING ENGLISH AT THE PRIMARY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH: PRESENT STATUS, ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Communicative English was introduced in Bangladesh in 1996. Communicative English is a modern approach in which a way of spontaneous learning is implied. In this method students are encouraged to practice four basic skills of language: reading, writing, speaking and listening. But with students having little opportunity to use English in their social and classroom environment and without a sufficient number of qualified English teachers, it is quite a challenge for them to acquire English language skills. In the existing situation, teaching and learning of English at the primary level in Bangladesh has a very low standard. Most of the students face difficulties to communicate in English and even competency level of most English teachers is not up to the mark. Besides, classrooms have very poor facilities. Classroom practices emphasize rote learning rather than understanding and use of English in real life situations. Keeping this in mind this study explores the present status of English teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh and identifies the major issues and challenges of teaching English at the primary level in Bangladesh and their probable solutions. The study shows that each teacher in both government and registered non-government schools has to take 7-8 classes everyday. The findings of the study also show that most of the students are weak in speaking (rural 52% & urban 60%) and listening (rural 26% & urban 24%) skills. The study strongly recommends providing training to the English teachers and more communicative and participatory classroom facilities for implementing communicative English language teaching methodology and assessment system.

I. INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, there is a competency-based curriculum for primary education (grade 1-5). In the existing curriculum there are 50 (fifty) competencies for 8 (eight) different subjects, such as: Bangla, English, Mathematics, Social science, General science, Religious studies and so on. Among these 50 (fifty) competencies, mentioned in the national curriculum only 4 (four) competencies are for English (Dey and Nazrul, 2006). It is expected that after completion of primary education students will be able to achieve those 4(four) competencies which will enable them to communicate in English at a simple level in a natural and spontaneous way. But in the existing situation of English language teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh students are required to memorize irrelevant details such as definitions of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. Accuracy is prioritized rather than confidence building, fluency and general communicative competencies. Therefore, it is very essential to match existing teaching methodologies with communicative

approach of English language teaching. The present study attempts to explore the present status of English teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh. It will also attempt to identify the major challenges and issues of English language teaching at the primary level to overcome the mismatch of existing English language teaching methodologies and the communicative English language teaching approach mentioned in the national curriculum.

1.2 Significance of the Study

English language skills are crucial as well as important in the context of the global market place, the knowledge of society and in the age of digital information technology. If we want to develop, we need to make a strong base of English language skills/competencies of students at the primary level, as primary education is the main base of students which helps them to be confident in this competitive world. Realizing the demand of English in the global age the current English Curriculum and syllabuses were revised in 1996 in

Bangladesh and according to the revised English national curriculum English language teaching is mainly based on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. But since the introduction of this approach of teaching, teachers have been facing serious problems in following the CLT approach. Therefore, responding to teachers' and students' opinions in favour of teaching formal grammar and composition, a second paper on grammar and composition was introduced in 2004. But yet confusion about the curriculum objectives and teaching methodology is adversely affecting the quality of teaching and learning English at the primary level in Bangladesh. The majority of our teachers cannot teach the existing communicative textbooks properly in accordance with CLT approach, because they do not have adequate proficiency in English and the pedagogical skills needed for CLT approach. It is therefore essential to analyze the present status of teaching English at the primary level in Bangladesh and to identify the major issues and challenges, to find out a way for effective English language teaching and learning at the primary level in Bangladesh.

It is expected that this study will be a significant one in the field of communicative English language teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh which will help the stakeholders to find out the most effective and cost-effective means of implementing the present communicative English national curriculum.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are -

1. To explore the present status of teaching English at the primary level in Bangladesh.
2. To identify the major issues and challenges of teaching English especially in communicative approach at the primary level in Bangladesh.
3. To find out a way to meet the major challenges of teaching English at the primary level in Bangladesh.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research design and procedures are as follows:

2.1 Sample of the Study

Sample were selected from Dhaka city and from Nasirnagar upazilla at Brahmanbaria district in Bangladesh. A description of the research area and

selected English teachers is given below separately-

a) Research Area of the Study

In this study fifty (50) primary schools were selected to collect data. Among these schools twenty-five (25) schools were selected from a rural area (from Nasirnagar upazilla at Brahmanbaria district) and twenty-five (25) schools were selected from an urban area (from Dhaka city).

b) Selected English Teachers of the Study

To collect information on the existing situation of teaching English at the primary level in Bangladesh, 100 (one hundred) English teachers were selected as study sample. Among them 50 (fifty) were selected from Dhaka city (2 teachers from each school) and 50 (fifty) were selected from Nasirnagar Upazilla at Brahmanbaria district (2 teachers from each school).

2.2 Development of Tool for Data Collection

In order to ascertain the academic qualifications and professional training of the English teachers and to get the necessary information about the existing English language teaching approach a questionnaire was developed in this study.

a) Questionnaire for the Selected English Teachers

In order to collect data about academic qualifications, professional training and needs and problems of English, English teachers from selected schools were provided a comprehensive questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first part contained the teachers' personal information including name, age, sex etc., the second part contained academic qualifications, professional training and experiences of English teachers and the third part contained the problems and needs of English teachers and the necessary information about English teaching-learning process.

2.3 Technique of Data Analysis

Data about the educational qualifications and the necessary information of the teaching process of the selected English teachers are presented in tables with analysis and interpretation. The 'yes-no' type questions relating to teaching activities are analyzed in a table and the rest of the short answers types questions are analyzed in some separate tables.

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

3.1 Educational Qualification of English Teachers

Table-01 shows that among the selected English

teachers of rural area 26% are S.S.C without training, 24% are S.S.C with P.T.I training, 8% are H.S.C without training, 28% are H.S.C with P.T.I training, 10% are B.A (Pass) with P.T.I training and only 4% are B.A (Pass) with B.Ed training.

Table-1: Teachers' educational qualification

General Education	Professional training							
	Without training		PTI		B.ED		M .Ed	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
S.S.C	26%		24%					
H.S.C	8%		28%					
B.A			10%	20%	4%	44%		10%
B.A (Honours)								4%
M.A						18%		4%

In urban area 20% of teachers are B.A (Pass) with PTI training, 44% of teachers are BA (Pass) with B.Ed and M.Ed training, 4% of teachers are B.A (Honours) with B.Ed and M.Ed training, 18% of teachers are M.A with B.Ed training and 4% of teachers are M.A with M.Ed training.

From the above discussion it is clear that in rural area 86% of English teachers are under graduate

i.e. only S.S.C and H.S.C, 14% of them are B.A (pass) and none of them are M.A with M.Ed training. But in urban area 78% of English teachers are B.A/B.A (honours) with B.Ed and M.Ed training and 22% of them are M.A with B.Ed and M.Ed training. So according to the teachers' qualifications we can say that the English teachers of urban area are more qualified than the English teachers of rural area.

3.2. English Language Teaching Process of the Selected English Teachers

Table 2: English language teaching process

Questions	Ans.
1. Do you follow any special teaching method during your teaching?	Yes
2. Is the English language teaching important for the primary level students?	Yes
3. Is it essential to take special care for English language teaching at the primary level?	Yes
4. Do you know about the four skills of English language?	Yes
5. Do you give emphasis on the four language skills during your teaching?	Yes
6. Do you think that your English language teaching is more effective?	Yes
7. Do you take any special initiative to make your English language teaching more effective?	Yes

The English teachers follow communicative approach to teaching English in Bangladesh. For effective teaching in communicative approach it is very essential to practice four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Accordingly, in response to the 'yes-no' type questions, (see Table-02) 100% English teachers in both rural and urban area answer 'yes' for every question which are essential for effective English teaching.

For example, all of the selected English teachers agree that English teaching is important for the primary level students, that they follow special teaching methods in their teaching process, that it is very essential to take special care for English teaching at the primary level, that they know about the four skills of English language and give emphasis on those four language skills during their teaching process and finally all of the selected English teachers take necessary steps to make their teaching more effective.

3.3. Subjects Taught by the English Teachers of Selected Schools

Table-3: Subjects taught by the English teachers of selected schools

Area	English		Other classes including English	
	No. of teachers	%	No. of teachers	%
Rural	0		50	100%
Urban	0		50	100%

For effective English language teaching at the primary level, the subject knowledge of English teachers is very important. English teachers need to have a level of English language skills and sufficient understanding of key concepts of English language in order to make curricular coherence. Especially the general aim of English language teaching is to enable students to speak, read and write English fluently. To achieve this goal the English teachers have to create opportunities for students to use English in meaningful, realistic, relevant situations. Games, role play activities,

information gap tasks, brain storming exercises, riddles, puzzles, cartoons, jokes, songs, and other low-cost and easily available teaching materials need to administer by the English teachers. Of course all of these depend on how teachers can handle students to integrate new knowledge with existing understanding.

In Bangladesh 100% of English teachers (see table-03) in rural and urban area take other classes including English i.e. there is no particular English teachers in any school. For making English language teaching more effective, there should be particular English teacher in every school.

3.4. Teaching Methods Followed by the Selected English Teachers

In response to the question about specific teaching methods followed by the selected English teachers in their teaching process, the teachers mentioned three types of teaching methods, e.g. Communicative, Lecture and Question-Answer methods.

Table-4: Specific teaching methods followed by the selected English teachers

Area	Communicative method		Lecture method		Question - Answer method	
	No. of teachers	%	No. of teachers	%	No. of teachers	%
Rural	0	0	42	84%	8	16%
Urban	16	32%	28	56%	6	12%

According to the teachers analysis the above table-04 shows that in rural area 84% teachers follow lecture method, 16% teachers follow Question-Answer method and none of them follow communicative method. But in urban area 32% follow communicative method, 56% follow lecture method and 12% follow question-answer method.

So from the above analysis we can say that most of the English teachers both in the rural (84%) and urban (56%) areas follow lecture method in their teaching learning process.

3.5. CLASS LOAD OF SELECTED ENGLISH TEACHERS

Table-5: Number of classes taught by the selected English teachers' everyday

Area	5/6 classes		6/7 classes	
	No. of teachers	%	No. of teachers	%
Rural	13	26%	37	64%
Urban	24	48%	26	52%

The teacher of English at any level especially at the primary level has a special responsibility to be well prepared because effective teaching mostly depends on the preparation of the teachers. The English teachers should have a real understanding and awareness of students, their needs and interests and the environment in which they teach. So they need to have some free time for taking preparation, i.e. for preparing lesson plan, teaching aids and so on, and focus upon personal qualifications, skills and kinds of knowledge which contribute to effective teaching. Two basic assumptions underlie these recommendations: first, to teach the content of his subject effectively, the teacher not only must know the varied subject matter of English but also must understand how to communicate his knowledge and appreciation to his students; second, his preparation for teaching English should be based upon and supplemented by the real situation.

But in Bangladesh the reality is not in favour of the English teachers. The majority numbers of English

teachers (64% & 52%) both in rural and urban area (see table-05) have to take 6/7 classes everyday. If an English teacher is burdened with 6/7 classes in a day, it is real truth that effective English language teaching is quite impossible with him/her.

3.6. Students' Competencies in Four Skills of English Language

Table-6: On which skills the students are generally weak in your class?

Area	Read- ing	Writ- ing	Listen- ing	Speak- ing
Rural	12%	10%	26%	52%
Urban	8%	8%	24%	60%

The main goal of the national curriculum is: To focus on the four skills of language – listening, speaking, reading and writing as learner centered activities within communicative context. But in reality only the skills of reading, writing and grammar are usually covered in classroom teaching both in rural and urban schools. This is because listening and speaking are not assessed either in school based or school-leaving examinations and so teachers and students do not worry about these two essential skills of communicative English. The analysis (see Table-06) also shows that majority numbers of students are weak in listening (rural 26% & urban 24%) and speaking skills (rural 52% & urban 60%). The English teachers should take necessary initiatives to overcome this situation. Similarly it is essential to give clear direction in the national curriculum to evaluate listening and speaking skills separately both in the classroom and internal examinations.

3.7. Problem Faced by the Selected English Teachers

Table 7: Problems faced by the selected English teachers during teaching

Area	Problem with irregular students	Problem with slow learners
Rural	74%	26%
Urban	92%	8%

Communicative English Language Teaching requires interactive classroom activities with the integration of the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Nevertheless, for creating sufficient interaction in classrooms

Bangladeshi English teachers face various types of problems. For instance, almost all the classrooms of Bangladesh are large.

The usual class-sizes exceed “seventy-five” (Brown 179) or even hundred. Therefore, when a teacher attempts to divide such a large class into groups it ultimately gives rises to managerial difficulties. Eventually, the teacher would face complications in monitoring the pair or group activities ensuring the “importance of meaningful, purposeful language and communication, which in turn must allow the student to give vent to creative possibilities” (Brown 181). To circulate among the groups listen to students, and offer suggestions and criticisms would demand more time and effort than a teacher can usually afford (Sarwar, 2007, p.2).

Along with the monitoring problem of large classes Bangladeshi English teachers faced problems with irregular and slow learners (see table-07) both in rural (74% & 26%) and urban (92% & 8%) area. In these cases the English teacher himself/herself can take some measures to solve these problems and the stakeholders of the schools i.e. parents, teachers, principals, and students should be more conscious to resolve these types of problems.

English was introduced as a compulsory subject at the first grade in 1991. Since then national policies were put in place to revive English and give it maximum space in the national curriculum. Furthermore, the previous methodology of English teaching (developing linguistic competence through grammar-translation method) was replaced by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in 1996. However, when we observe the state of teaching and learning English in Bangladesh, we can see that there are some crucial factors/ constraints for student underachievement in English. For example, overcrowded classrooms, overload/overwork of teachers, lack of trained teachers in Communicative Language Teaching, inadequate teaching-learning materials, overloaded curricula, school environment, attitude and behaviour of parents and school management, teachers spend a noisy office hour, time factor/short class time, the quality of teaching-learning process, most of the teachers have to teach other subjects beside English and so on. Data/ suggestions from selected English teachers provide some significant evidence to help us resolve

existing problems of English language teaching and learning at the primary level in Bangladesh. The selected teachers provided suggestions in some important areas of teaching-learning, like teachers, students, parents, learning materials, teaching-learning process, classroom facilities and school

environment (Table- 08). According to the teachers opinion, for ensuring the effective English language teaching and learning we need to focus on these areas (Table-08, suggestions from selected teachers), especially we need to take some steps immediately.

Table-8: Suggestions from selected English teachers

Areas	Suggestions from English Teachers
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Each school should have sufficient teachers so that the teachers are not overloaded with classes - Teachers need to be provided professional/pedagogical English language training - Teachers should be well planned about the teaching-learning process - Teachers need to be well paid - Teachers need to be provided the scope to implement their training - The academic background of the English teachers should be English.
Teaching-Learning process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communicative English language teaching method should be followed in the classroom - Medium of instruction should be bilingual (Both Bangla & English) - Four language skills (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) need to be assessed in the examination system - Teaching – Learning process should make the learning interesting and a pleasure - Students are in need to have/provide the scope to practice English in the teaching-learning process.
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students should be regular and attentive in their classes - Students should have minimum language competencies/skills after a certain grade - Students should be sincere to complete their learning activities
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents should be conscious about their children’s education, especially to make them regular and attentive in schools/ classrooms.
Learning materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low cost learning materials are very helpful in making students understand and practice English in their context. - National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) should provide supplementary learning materials in each school for English language teaching and learning.
Classroom facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The classrooms should be spacious as needed for group works, pair works and some other participatory activities - The classrooms should have sufficient and easily movable furniture in accordance with the number of students - The classrooms should be well decorated with essential learning materials including chalkboard
School environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An English language lab in the school compound will be helpful to make opportunity for practicing English - Scope to practice speaking English in the reading room, common room and in some other places will be helpful to develop English language skills.

4. KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The key findings of the study reveal the significant information about educational and professional qualifications and the English teaching process of the selected English teachers as well as the existing situation of English language teaching-learning at the primary level in Bangladesh. For instance:

- 1) In rural area 86% of English teachers are under graduate i.e. only S.S.C and H.S.C, 14% of them are B.A (pass) and none of them are M.A with M.Ed training. But in urban area 78% of English teachers are B.A/B.A (honours) with B.Ed and M.Ed training and 22% of them are M.A with B.Ed and M.Ed training. In fact the English teachers of urban

area are more qualified than the English teachers of rural area.

- 2) Almost all (100%) English teachers in both rural and urban area have positive impression/attitude for Effective English teaching.
- 3) All, 100% of the English teachers in rural and urban area take other classes including English i.e. there is no particular English teachers in any school in Bangladesh. The teacher, who teaches English, has to take other classes also.
- 4) Majority of the English teachers (84% in rural area and 56% in urban area) follow lecture method in their teaching process.
- 5) The majority of the English teachers (64% & 52%) both in rural and urban areas have to take 6/7 classes everyday.
- 6) The majority of the students are weak in speaking (rural 52% & urban 60%) and listening (rural 26% & urban 24%) skills.
- 7) Along with the problem of large classes Bangladeshi English teachers face problems with irregular and slow learners both in rural (74% & 26%) and urban (92% & 8%) areas.
- 8) To resolve the existing problems of English teaching, each school should have sufficient English teachers, teachers need to be well trained, well paid and provided scope to implement their training and the academic background of the English teachers should be English.
- 9) Four language skills (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) need to be assessed in the examination system.
- 10) Teaching – learning process should make the learning interesting and a pleasure and in the teaching-learning process it is essential to have/provide the scope to students to practice English.
- 11) Students should be regular and attentive in their classes, they should have minimum language competencies/skills after a certain grade and they should be sincere to complete their learning activities, especially to practice English.
- 12) Parents should be conscious about their children's education, especially to make them regular and attentive in schools/ classrooms.
- 13) Low cost learning materials are very helpful in making students understand and practice English in their context. National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) should provide supplementary learning materials in each

school for English language teaching and learning.

- 14) The classrooms should be spacious as needed for group works, pair works and some other participatory activities, the classrooms should have sufficient and easily movable furniture in accordance with the number of students as well as the classrooms should be well decorated with essential learning materials including chalkboard.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the study asks the following recommendations:

- 1) Most of the teachers both in rural and urban areas have to take 6-7 classes everyday. This situation should be rectified. A teacher should not take more than 3-4 classes everyday. Though the number of teachers in the Government and non-government primary schools is about 309,000 (www.unesco.org/education/wef/...), considering the number of primary school students (16.4 million: age 6 to 10: source: Directorate of Primary Education, 2009) and to reduce the class load of primary school teachers, the Government and non-government organizations jointly can take initiatives to increase the number of the primary school teachers.
- 2) There should be an English teacher in every school and they should be aware of the communicative English teaching method. In this regard, the teachers who teach English should be designated as 'English Teachers' giving them the opportunities to specialize in teaching English and grow professionally, like, English language proficiency courses and supplement pedagogy courses on CLT should be integrated with the main training courses run at Primary Training Institutes (PTIs) and Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs).
- 3) The English teachers should use effective techniques of English teaching in the classroom. In that case NCTB could arrange trainings for the English teachers at their clustering areas and NCTB should ensure the availability of English Teacher's Guide to the English teachers of classes 1-5 in each school in rural and urban areas.
- 4) In every school the English teachers should be selected on the basis of their academic/subject background.

“The academic qualifications of the majority of the primary teachers are Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). They pass these certificate examinations despite getting the bare minimum pass marks in English. As a result, they come to teach English with little or no English language proficiency of their own” (Hoque, 2006, p 2).

So during the selection procedure of English Teachers, a standard range/level of marks getting in the certificate examinations can be one of the major criteria of selection.

- 5) Teachers who do not have English background should be given short-term training in English teaching methodologies. The school authority can arrange in-house trainings creating and using their own resource pool as well as the local education offices can take regular initiatives in this regard.
- 6) Each school should appoint at least one English teacher who is capable of teaching English in all the primary classes.
- 7) NCTB can provide appropriate teaching aids in addition to the textbooks both for urban and rural primary schools to develop the students’ four basic language skills.
- 8) Reasonable teacher-students ratio should be maintained in English classroom and it could be 1:40. The school authority can divide a large class into considerable sections with School Managing Committee’s (SMC) concern and support and for this the Government also needs to provide convenient rules and regulations.
- 9) One of the findings shows that both in rural and urban areas majority of the students are weak in speaking and listening skills. So teachers should take special care to develop these skills of the students. In this regard, teachers can incorporate a variety of activities for speaking and listening skills in his/her lesson plan which will ensure maximum students’ involvement in the classroom activities and help students to improve their speaking and listening skills.
- 10) The existing situation of English teaching in the rural area is not developed like the urban area. So the Government and non-government organizations should take necessary steps to improve the English teaching- learning situation of the rural area. Especially the Government and non-government

organizations should give/create opportunities for the rural English teachers to specialize in English teaching and develop themselves professionally attending in different training programs, workshops, seminars and short English language proficiency courses.

6. CONCLUSION

The current approach of English language teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh prescribed in the curriculum is the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). “CLT requires interactive classroom activities with the integration of four language skills reading, writing, listening and speaking” (Sarwar, 2007, p.1). But in reality, English teachers at the primary level in Bangladesh face various types of constraints in increasing the interaction and integration of the four skills in English language teaching classrooms. “Therefore, the English teachers should be dynamically equipped with professional sensibility and in depth teaching knowledge to take swift, realistic and novel steps to” (Sarwar, 2007, p.3) ensure effective English language teaching and learning at the primary level in Bangladesh. Moreover, to equip the English teachers in such a way special projects for English teachers’ development should be taken by the Government and non-government organizations.

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