

Can we Formulate English Education Policies Which Respond to Ground Level? Comparative Study between Sub-urban & Remote Rural Areas in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper aims to look at the English education policies in Bangladesh. This article gives an explanation of the achievement of English at secondary level focusing on suburban and remote areas in Bangladesh by internal comparative analysis. English has a case of historical relevance in Bangladesh. In spite of long schooling in English language, students at secondary level, in particular, are not proficient in English. Grounded language policies are required for the progress of a uniform education system in Bangladesh. As there is no such policy in Bangladesh, English language teaching and learning is directly affected. Inductive Thematic Analysis was employed to analyze the numeric interview data. In the process of analysis and assessment of language policies, attempts will be made to realize the justification for such policies and their implications. Moreover, the paper will describe the emergence of English as a fundamental second language in the educational institutions and how it is linked to the economic development of the region.

Keywords: English education policies, ground level, comparative study, Bangladesh

1.0 Introduction

Bangladesh as a developing country has been facing challenges in the way of its progress and prosperities. Education is one of the most promising fields where the country is struggling with many challenges. Language plays a vital role in a society because it is not only a mode of communication but a way of life also. English is considered to be an International language and thus both the developing and developed countries have become equally active to be good at this language. However, it is time for the non-English speaking developing countries to think seriously about who most benefits from this language. It carries a historical, cultural, ethical, religious and ethnic indication of an individual. And as such, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Social Organization (UNESCO) advocates that languages are the most powerful instruments for preserving and developing tangible and intangible heritage (Mohsin,2003).

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1.1 English language education in Bangladesh: Historical background

After the battle of Plessey in 1757, knowledge of English became essential for trading partners in the Bengal business circle. As the contact between the British and the Bengali grew as a result of the establishment of warehouses, law courts and other institutions, the demand for English in a section of the community increased tremendously. The missionaries established English schools and introduced western education in India. After the independence of Pakistan and India in 1947, English attained a very important status in the newly independent states. In Pakistan, the Bengali-Urdu controversy arose. Even the founding father of Pakistan, policy planners of Pakistan especially Mohammad Ali Jinnah in a public meeting held on 21st March 1948 in Dhaka clearly expressed the opinion that the state language should be Urdu. But his attempt to impose Urdu on Bangla was resisted by the students. The state language action committee was formed. On 21st February 1952, Pakistan Police fired on students protesting the move to suppress the rights of Bangla and make Urdu the only state language. Five students were killed and many were injured. The language movement infused a feeling of linguistic nationalism among Bengalis.

The English education in this subcontinent might be seen both as a historical incident and as an inevitability. The people of this region, accepted English primarily to maintain a livelihood and later on to pursue knowledge and wisdom via the language. The use of this language in education gradually shifted from a more religious purpose to a more practical one. However, it spread from a small fraction of the elite to the middle class through the language could never become a possession of the mass. It is notable that there is evidence that sometimes the interest and endeavor of the non-native speakers in the development of English education surpassed that of the British Indian Government. Though the national sentiment later affected the status of English; this awakening had a lot to do with English education. This legacy to the English language, however, plays a very significant role in the social and educational life of Bangladesh. In the Pakistan regime, which lasted until the end of 1971, English continued to play an important role in the national life. It was used as a lingua franca between the then West Pakistan and East Pakistan. This was the language used in government administration, law courts and financial activities. In higher education, it was the medium of instruction. At higher secondary level, it was treated as the optional medium of instruction until 1962. As a subject, however, English was taught forcibly at secondary and higher secondary levels.

1.2 Research questions

The study aims at presenting the answers to certain questions about the English skills among the suburban area and rural area in Bangladesh and the way of improving English education. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How are English skills different in different areas?
2. How is the necessity of English different in two areas?
3. Is there any policy recommendation for English education?

1.3 The State and status of English in Bangladesh

In the constitution of Bangladesh, while Bengali is declared as the state language, the status of English has not been pointed out.

The constitution of Bangladesh is bilingual in Bengali and English. By its very structure, it is a bilingual constitution, but one language status is de facto, and the status of other is both de facto and de juror. Bengali is both a de facto and de juror status language whereas English is only de facto status, even that status has not been mentioned in anywhere in the constitution. The Bangali Introduction Law 1987 made it compulsory for employees in Government, semi-government and autonomous institutions to use Bengali in inter-official memos, legal documents, and correspondence except in case of communication with foreign governments, organizations and so on. Consequently, in Bangladesh, English shifts from its previous status of a second language to that of a foreign language. The status of English in Bangladesh both as a medium of instruction and as a subject of the study appears rather be very unstable. The report of the education commission of Bangladesh 1974 recommended that Bengali should be the medium of instruction at all levels of education in Bangladesh. This resulted in English being the optional medium of instruction at tertiary level in 1975. In that report, English was recommended to be introduced as a compulsory subject from class 6 and be taught with this status until class 12. In 1976, the national curriculum committee formed by the government made provisions for teaching English from class 3. This decision came into effect in 1980. In 1990, the government again reversed the decision and suggested that English should be introduced from class 1. The decision was implemented in 1992. This has remained the same case until now. In this regard, however, a further change may be forthcoming, as the report of the committee for the formulation of education policy 1997 has recommended that English should be introduced as a compulsory subject from class 3.

As a medium of instruction, English has been recognized as an alternative to Bengali at the secondary level by the Ministry of Education since 1995. This decision allows the examination papers to be written in English.

The same provision has been extended to higher secondary level from 1997. Since the emergence of Bangladesh, there have been a number of efforts to evaluate and promote the situation of English language teaching and learning. The Ministry of Education set up an English Language Teaching Task Force in 1975.

In fact, English is becoming a historical case in Bangladesh. During the period before 1947, people had more reasons to use it as a means of communication.

For practical reasons, it was also largely used as a medium of instruction in education. After 1947, the underlying factors to use and learn the language remained almost the same. In Bangladesh period, however, English is set in a monolingual situation where its state and status have become more dependent on the constitution and language policies

1.4 The role of English language

There was a long history when English started its journey in Bangladesh. The East India Company played the central role in spreading English in India and Bangladesh. So, the colonial rule was the key player for spreading English in Bangladesh. In 1800, the Fort William College was established in Calcutta to teach local languages to East India Company officials. However, recognizing the value of English, the educated middle class established a college to teach English language and literature (Hossain and Tollefson, 2006). So, it was not only the British but also the local elites who wanted English education, due to its social and economic value (Pennycook, 1994).

1.5 Language policy in the academic arena

After the independence of Bangladesh, education got the highest priority among not only the small group of people but also the common people. With this objective, the government of Bangladesh had established several Education Commissions and Committees since independence.

The first Education Commission was formed in 1972, headed by the leading educationist and scientist Dr. Quadrat-e-Khuda. The commission submitted its report to the government in 1974. The report was formulated and was based on the socio-economic and political state and cultural heritage of the country. The report claimed that Bengali has many advantages as the medium of instruction, particularly its value in developing students, natural intelligence, original thinking, and imagination. However, despite its support for Bangla, the commission also argued that English should remain the language of higher education until the colonial education system could be reformed. In the commission's report, the Madrasah education system was formed differently.

The rest of education in Bangladesh, later education commissions which submitted reports in 1987, 1997, and 2000 continued this dual language process. Recently, English had been made compulsory from Grade 1 (Hossain and Tollefson, 2006, p.250). For the two national secondary examinations, English is a compulsory subject.

1.6 English in the educational policy

The proper role of English and Bangla in Bangladesh is one of the most debatable issues among all policymakers who have shaped the role of language in the

academic arena since independence. One group of policymakers favors English as the medium of instruction while the other group favors the use of Bangla.

The first group argues that the role of English opens doors to large possibilities for economic development (Hossain, 2004). The second group argues that the continued use of English is not only unfair to the rural population, who have not access to high-quality English language teaching, but also pedagogically unsound. A third group tries to reach a compromise between the previous two positions and agrees that English is necessary for development; its use creates serious inequalities that must be addressed.

In reality, there are three educational systems. In Bangla medium schools, English is taught as a compulsory subject, but interaction in most of the English classes take place in Bangla. In English medium schools, Bangla is used for much of the informal social interaction, but English is used for subject matter instruction. In addition, in Madrasahs, Bangla and Arabic are used as a medium of instruction.

1.7 The Constitution of Bangladesh and language system

Bangladesh adopted its new constitution and placed the Bangla language at the center of Bangladeshi nationalism. The constitution also declared Bangla as ‘the state’ language (Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972,p3).

Despite the constitutional provision for Bangla as the medium of instruction, the educational system did not immediately adopt Bangla as a universal medium of instruction. At the universities, apart from the English departments, students have the option of answering examinations in either Bangla or English. The phenomenal growth of the IT industry in Bangladesh has also made people aware of the importance of English as a language of communication. As in the past, English has become essential for economic purposes. The importance of English in Bangladesh today may be measured by the formal recognition of English as a second language in 2001 (Banglapedia, 2006).

1.8 The choice of English in language policy

In the present global world with its technological advancement, the use of English has been growing at a startling rate, in particular in the parts of the developing world. It is, therefore, natural to wonder how far English may have advanced into the lives and languages of people in Bangladesh. It is now found that English is widely used in several domains, including education, science, technology, commerce and industry, and informal social contacts. Some major forces of free choice are historical, economic and bureaucratic. So, the economic power is one of the greatest reasons for the hegemonic situation of English in Bangladesh. It is still the case that English is prestigious, particularly in international business and commerce. In Bangladesh, where English is used as a foreign language, it is a major

determinant of position and power. For this reason, parents insist on their children learning English from kindergarten.

1.9 The implication of language policy in relation to English

Bangladesh needs a pragmatic language policy considering its present socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions. Now it is high time we thought about language policy in relation to English. However, when a policy designer wants to implement a pragmatic language policy in relation to English, one should consider the following guidelines.

Firstly, it must be recognized that language is not about language alone (Harriman and Barnaby, 1996,p.13) but also it encompasses sociopolitical and economic issues.

The present socio-political and economic condition of Bangladesh necessitates a pragmatic language policy to overcome its hegemonic condition because English has already enjoyed the second language environment in Bangladesh.

Secondly, an effective language policy should be implemented as a meaningful bilingual education will ensure the combination of the mother tongue and English.

Thirdly, language policy must be equitable and it should minimize the incidence of exclusion, whether in terms of those who have access or who are denied access on grounds of language alone (bamgbose, 2000:8-16). Bangladesh solves this unequal situation adopting a pragmatic language policy and gives the equal chance to its future generation.

Otherwise, Bangladesh suffers some basic problems to fulfill its millennium development goal.

Finally, a language policy is not an end in itself. The rationale for it must be what it can contribute to the overall culture, human and socio-economic development of a country (Bamgbose, 2000: 160).

1.10 English policy and proficiency in public schooling

In Bangladesh, the standard of English may have fallen since independence in 1971.

Policy and practice have been fragmented and inconsistent. In 1974, the first commission report explicitly stated that Bengali would be the medium of instruction and positioned English as the second language. English was to be taught only from Grades V1 to X11. In 1991, the government recommended that English be taught from Grade 1, but it was not implemented in 1997. It can also be mentioned that since 1998, as per the agreement between the Ministry of Education of Bangladesh and the US government, every year around 200 US volunteers come to Bangladesh in order to teach English at the secondary level schools. Moreover, English teachers' training specialists from abroad come as resource persons in order to train up

teachers of English as a second language in Bangladesh. A new policy is, therefore, expected, focusing on the training of teachers of English. The curriculum in teachers' training is presently being upgraded.

1.11 Continuity with the colonial period

The global role of the English language and English speaking cultures derives not from an inherent superiority, nor from the natural outcome of market forces on a level playing field, nor from a spontaneous movement towards global unity (Crystal, 1997). Rather it derives from the past and present hegemony of the USA and the UK in economics, politics and in the cultural spheres. Certain governmental and private agencies play a key role, such as the British Council (Pennycook, 2001, p.61). Within Bangladesh, the English medium school directly reproduces Anglo-American hegemony. These schools play a similar global role in most Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Hong Kong once ruled by the UK. In these countries, English has become dominant not so much in the number of speakers but in the power knowledge relations that govern its use and are sustained by its use.

1.12 Language planning and strategy in Bangladesh

In language policy, there is no general rule about national/ global language policy that holds for all times and places.

It cannot be argued that promotion of a local language instead of a dominant language, or promotion of a dominant language at the expense of local language, are in themselves good or bad (Pennycook, 2001). One problem for national language policy is that in the minds of most people, national identity and learning English are positioned as antagonistic, not complementary. This is a direct result of the colonial tradition itself with its long usage of English as a tool of divide and rule. Educational language policy and planning must help to build both universal literacies in Bangla and competence in global English. If a path that combines global English and national identity is not found, ideologically insular forces within the nation may take advantage of this, adversely affecting both national progress in science and technology, and socio-cultural development. There are three starting points for educational planning.

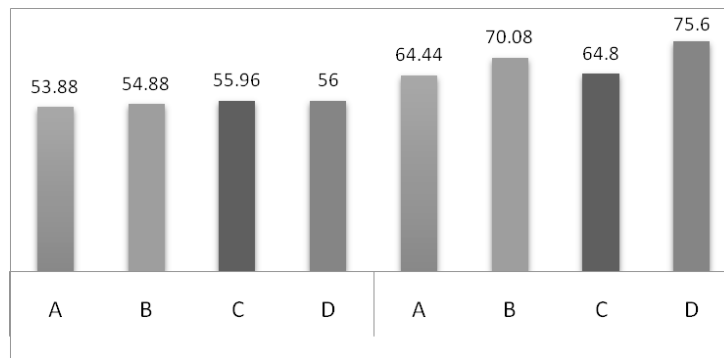
The starting point for language planning is that a strong Bangla medium education system, necessarily funded primarily by government, is the foundation for both universal literacy and the building of widespread competence in English. Developing nations that have lifted literacy to higher levels have mostly used the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, at least at primary level. Students with a sound foundation of literacy in the mother tongue acquire literacy in a second language more quickly (Mehrotra, 1998, p.479).

The second point for language planning is to provide more extensive, better quality and higher Standard English classes. The typical provision in public schools is less than five hours of English classes per week, often with untrained teachers. This is not good enough.

The third point for language planning is to provide English classes within the terms of the nation-building project, founded on a living developing Bangla identity.

2.0 Resource allocation

In Bangladesh, resource allocation for education in general, and English teaching, in particular, has been one of the lowest in the world (Hamid, Sussex and Khan 2009). Consequently, quality English teaching, particularly in rural schools, is far from adequate.



A score of English: Difference between sub-urban and remote neighborhood: Students' English achievement in the 10th grade in both regions

3.0 Students' English achievement

The study results revealed that students in the 10th grade, among all the schools, four of them located in Bhola (remote area), got lower scores compared to the other four schools, located in Narayanganj (sub-urban area) in Bangladesh.

Ground level; Classroom, teachers and education environment:

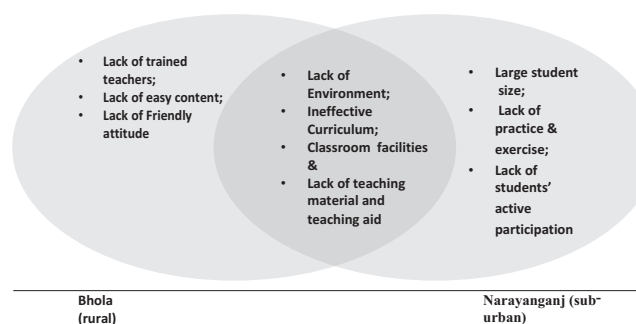


Figure: Findings in both regions

4.0 Findings from both regions

In Bhola, most of the students regarded the lack of English teachers as one of the main problems for their poor performance in English. Moreover, difficult contents and lack of friendly attitude from their teachers were also held responsible. However, students from Narayanganj felt their class size was too large, and the environment of the class or cohort was not friendly and conducive to practice. Also, they were not able to participate actively in any group work or pair work during the school hours. Nevertheless, students from both areas believed that their environment to achieve English was not conducive.

Also, they opined that their curriculum was not effective to meet the social demand. Moreover, they did not get enough need-based classroom facilities i.e. computer, internet, overhead projector along with teaching aids and language learning materials.

What's more, they did not have enough time to use the modern technology.

5.0 Fieldwork and methodology

The study took place at Bhola, a rural area in Bangladesh. and Narayanganj a suburban region an industrial area, especially prominent for the jute trade, processing plants and textile sector of the country. The survey was conducted between September 7, 2011, and October 19, 2011. Bangladesh is highly diversified in terms of socio-economic aspects. The urban area usually enjoys more advantages, in terms of education, communication, healthcare etc. compared to rural communities. Thus, the selection of a rural area, Bhola and an urban area, Narayanganj as a study field is very meaningful to conduct a comparative study. Narayanganj Sadar was selected as a representative of a typical urban area as it is situated at arm's length of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, and as it is endowed with some facilities available for the standard urban life in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bhola Sadar was selected as a representative of a distinctive rural area of Bangladesh where the standard urban facilities are hardly found.

Inductive Thematic Analysis was employed to analyze the numeric interview data. In this study, the qualitative research design is used for describing the stakeholders in their natural settings.

6.0 Necessity of English language skill

The knowledge of English is more critical as well as important in the context of the global marketplace, the knowledge of society and in the age of digital information technology. Dr. Mohammad Farashuddin (2011), former Governor of Bangladesh Bank, and founder Vice-Chancellor, East-West University of Bangladesh said, "proficiency in English is a must for the nation to abolish poverty, hunger, disease,

illiteracy, and indignity.” This research is aimed at making contributions towards the quality improvements of English education in secondary schools in Bangladesh. By clarifying the factors that influence students’ English achievements, this study attempts to suggest a way of how to improve achievement and effective English education policies.

The results of this study can be used for a variety of purposes. Principally, it will help teacher-trainers, educational administrators, policymakers, researchers, and teachers in Bangladesh to identify the factors likely to increase students’ English achievement. Here, this study will try to point out some areas where steps may be taken to promote English teaching and learning conditions in Bangladesh, encompassing the secondary-level students, rural as well as suburban territorial jurisdiction.

7.0 Factors in people’s side

The study was intended to find out significant factors that influence students’ English achievements in the secondary schools in Bangladesh with a specific focus on Bhola and Narayanganj. Four secondary schools in Bhola and four schools in Narayanganj at the same level were selected as the sample schools for this study. Six categories of respondents such as students in the 10th grade, English teachers, school principals, guardians, community members and Upazilla education officers were selected for conducting the study and the sample size for each category for each region was 164, 16, 4, 40, 20 and 1 respectively. However, the sample sizes for the students in the 10th grade were not equal across the educational institutions, because the numbers of the students were not equal in each school. The number of students as respondents was selected proportionately to the number of students. Thus the number of respondents across the schools varies between 36 and 46. The survey was conducted between September 7, 2011, and October 19, 2011.

This study is descriptive in nature. The study revealed important findings, which can provide policy implications and suggestions to improve the quality of students’ English achievement at the secondary level in Bhola and in Narayanganj. Also, it claims a language policy for the sustainable development of the students.

8.0 Guardians

Guardians were asked questions for an indication to identify the main factors responsible for creating barriers to learn English by the students.

On the basis of the view of the guardians, the lack of any specific English grammar book was a major factor in Bhola while the lack of teaching manuals was the main problem in Narayanganj. It was revealed that teachers, as well as students, were not following any particular grammar book through a unified educational system across the country. Also, teachers were not following teaching manuals as the supply of this item was not implemented properly and timely.

It can be mentioned that the South Asian learners learn English for historical, political, social and cultural reasons, which are radically different from those of South-East Asian or African learners(Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

9.0 Community members

Opinions of community members suggest that a lack of English teachers is liable for low English achievement in Bhola and in Narayanganj. Nonetheless, lack of practice is another dominant factor in Narayanganj. This endorses the opinion of school principals and to some extent that of students and teachers. Thus the lack of teachers is indeed liable for low English achievement in both regions. It can be noted that Walberg's (1984) theory of educational productivity requires nine factors to increase students' achievement of cognitive and affective outcomes.

10.0 Implication of language policy

Bangladesh needs a pragmatic language policy considering its present socio-economic conditions. However, when a policy designer wants to implement a pragmatic language policy in relation to English, one could consider the following guidelines:

To begin with, it is to be recognized that language is not about language alone (Harriman and Burnaby, 1996,p13) but it encompasses sociopolitical and economic issues. As a former colonial country, English is related to our sociopolitical issues. Also, global language is needed to strengthen its economy. Secondly, language policy should be equitable in that it should minimize the incidence of exclusion, whether in terms of those who have access or who are denied access on grounds of language alone (Bamgbose, 2000:8-16). Third, an effective language policy should be implemented not only for a minority but for the generality of the population. However, a language policy is not an end in itself.

The rationale for it must be what it can contribute to the overall culture, human and socio-economic development of a country(Afolayan, 1984:1; Reagan, 2001:320; Webb, 1996:186; Bamgbose,2000:160).

11.0 Conclusion

It is recognized by all that English is imperative for the economic development of the country. Hence, our political consensus is very vital to execute a realistic language policy in relation to English. But, to recommend a potential language policy, we need to conclude some processes. This piece of writing, therefore, tries to suggest some processes which are pivotal for a prospective language policy in Bangladesh.

For addressing the specific research questions, an important finding in this study is that students' English achievement is better in Narayanganj than in Bhola.

Second, a vital finding is, the reality of language policy discourse in Bangladesh today is that it moves towards English.

It is heartening to note that a range of activities can ensure learners' involvement in their English education; make the class interactive and enjoyable. At the same time, we also need to take initiatives for the improvement of slow learners and irregular students in English acquisition. Besides, government promise, the involvement of the local community as well as conscious citizens, the authority concerned and the English language teaching specialists in the whole process can ensure a higher achievement of students' English capability through addressing these factors

Hence, there is a lot of local diversity between Bhola and Narayanganj. Now government or international organizations should create policies which will respond to diversity.

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