

ELT: An Overall Insight into the Paradigm Shift in the Teaching-Learning Condition in Bangladesh

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Abstract

English language, the language of development, scientific advancement, information, opportunity, employment, power, and prestige in Bangladesh, has become the synonym of all progresses in recent years. English language teaching has acquired new dimensions in as much as it has crept into diverse methods of ELT at various levels of education. The Western paradigm of English teaching has occupied a prestigious position in the educational system of Bangladesh for decades. It is a well-known fact to all that language teaching and learning is affected by a host of factors ranging from the macro political and cultural environments of a country or region to the micro perceptions and practices of individual teachers or learners. Hence, the demand for different methodologies for different learners or learning situations arises gradually. The changes in the classrooms, ruled by traditional methodologies for years, regarding the adaptation of communicative language teaching, can be seen to be a direct result of the paradigm shift in the realm of English language teaching and learning. This article attempts to explain the shift in practice and reality of English language teaching by taking a close look at various features that affected the choice of the varieties of English taught and learned.

Introduction

The field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has experienced manifold levels of changes to respond to the needs of the learners at different stages. A widespread dissatisfaction with the conventional method has led to the development of new styles of classroom practices for teaching English as a foreign or a second language. This development takes place based on contextual realities and teachers' experience and knowledge about ELT. As for ELT in Bangladesh, English language teaching-learning practices are still revolving around the concept of "method." Bangladesh, like many other countries of the world, has not been able to come out of the method paradigm. Before the introduction of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), it was the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) that was traditionally followed for teaching English in the country. As with other methods, dissatisfaction was also there due to their "failure" to ensure communicative competence among learners. Therefore, the shift from this method (i.e., GMT) to the CLT approach was made on the expectation that this change would improve the quality of English teaching and learning in the country as a whole. Resultantly, new textbooks compatible with the principles of CLT were written for the students of the primary to the higher secondary levels of education, and training on this new approach was given to the English teachers so that they could properly apply the principles of this approach in classroom teaching. But in spite of all these efforts, the desired result is

still a far cry. Even after fourteen years of the introduction of CLT in the country, the quality of English education here has not improved much. Several attempts have been taken to prove the justification of the inclusion of the CLT approach in the curriculum in our country. However, though the CLT approach was not imposed suddenly on our curriculum, the implementation of CLT in the present context in Bangladesh is still questionable.

ELT: A Need for Transformation

Along with globalization, English has established itself as the world's common language for academic and business interaction, becoming the international language of choice or *lingua franca* (Bamgbose, 2001; Graddol, 2006; Murata & Jenkins, 2009). English is now the most commonly used language in the world as many western nations have adopted it as their first language. British colonization has helped the spread of English throughout the globe, making it one of the most influential languages, even in nations where English is not the first language. English is used as the official language in many countries where the first language is not necessarily English, making it almost mandatory to learn the language for administrative purposes.

For decades, English language teaching (ELT) professionals in Asia have embraced the paradigm of teaching developed in Western countries. Recent research in second language acquisition suggests that certain traditional practices in Asia, such as memorization and form-focused learning, which were believed to be ineffective, may have an important role to play in teaching and learning. Hence, for English language teaching in Asia, we need to take a more realistic look at what is being taught and learned, where the teaching and learning is taking place, and who is involved in the teaching and learning. Teaching and learning of English in educational institutions in our country especially in the small towns and rural areas is rather “inadequate” and “unproductive.”

Of late, we the Bangladeshi teachers of English at the undergraduate level have become aware of the sad but real fact that most students in the college easily manage to pass the examination without making much effort to either pick up the language or learn to appreciate the utility of language. The domination of the traditional methods like GTM has compelled the students to develop the habit of cramming everything without putting much effort. Therefore, the “creativity” is lost somewhere. Even capable students who can express themselves in writing do so in their native language, but not in English. The teacher is mostly expected to translate each and every phrase so that at least the literary texts are somehow driven home.

When we, the teachers of English, address ourselves to the problem of how to meet the needs of Bangladeshi students because of their deficiency in English, we are confronted with the fact that more than the students, it is the teacher of English who is guilty of leaving the students in a quandary. This is because we refuse to give in to the changing demands of the English learning situation in the wake of globalization where it is the functional aspect of the language that matters more than achieving the perfection of the form. A radical change in our perception is all we need if we want our students to meet the challenges of an increasingly *Englishized* world.

The Overall Status of ELT in Bangladesh

In the history of Bangladeshi ELT, the English language teaching improvement project, which was launched in 1997, has been a breakthrough in two senses. Firstly, it recognized the need for a coherent institutional structure of ELT in Bangladesh. At present there is no institute or center at the national level to monitor and improve the English language teaching and learning situation. Secondly, the improvement project has helped the promotion of CLT. The project is jointly funded by the Government of Bangladesh and the Government of the UK and a number of local and UK scholars have contributed to it. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board and the British Council are the administrative bodies of this project. To ensure a better ELT situation at secondary level, this countrywide project has focused on 3 main areas: teaching materials, teachers' training, and the reformation of the examination system. In order to train English language teachers, as part of original plan, the project has established four regional resource centers in teacher training colleges and ten satellite resource centers in government high schools. It is almost 15 years since this project started but it has passed only its initial stages, while its future impact depends on the level of its continuation and future activities (Yasmin, 2006).

ELT in Bangladesh faces three main challenges. The first challenge is the lack of sufficient awareness about the significant difference between language and literature teaching. The general view is that majority of educators, policy makers, and English language teachers in Bangladesh have inadequate knowledge about this difference, and this has resulted in a complicated situation of Bangladeshi English language teaching. It appears that the national curriculum and the text books of ELT have focused for a long period on English literature rather than the English language; they did not even adopt the approach of teaching language through literature.

Another challenge to teaching English is the lack of focus on modern English. Generally, the English language that has been taught in Bangladesh is rather old fashioned. English was formally introduced in the Bangladesh education system approximately two hundred years ago. Over the years, though, the English language has changed, whereas in Bangladesh, in many situations the two hundred year old forms of English are still in domination. There is, however, a growing concern to introduce the communicative approach of English in the country, which has also been reflected in new textbooks. Many English teachers in the rural areas, however, are still having problems teaching the new textbooks which have highlighted the communicative use of English.

Bangladesh is a developing country with Bangla as the first language, and English as a second language as it is needed to keep pace with the global world. No country can be isolated in a fast growing multicultural world with ever changing communication technologies. For advancement in life, it is no longer desirable to be monolingual, particularly in developing countries. As English is widely used all over the world, Bangladesh is now responding to this challenge through programs such as CLT. Therefore, the present discussion began with reporting students' perspectives on their learning and the effects of the CLT program, as well as the challenges students face and the supports they have, or would like to have, to make ESL

learning effective in school life and beyond. While many factors are responsible for students' underachievement in learning English, evidence is there to argue that with the cooperation of students, teachers, parents, and teacher educators, it is possible to improve the levels of achievement (Fletcher & Parkhill, 2007; Franken & Haslett, 1999; Hite & Evans, 2006; Safford & Costley, 2008; Sirota & Bailey, 2009).

Though the CLT approach is used widely and effectively in non-English speaking countries to teach English as a foreign or a second language and for developing communication skills (Sakura, 2001; Savignon, 2003; Thompson, 1996), it fails to generate critical thinking that is also needed to comprehend and explain the current international context. CLT instigates creativity, but creativity in itself is not enough to equip students to deal with issues of distinctiveness and to look at their world "differently." We also need to help students value their own culture, language, and history at the same time as they learn the language and values of others.

In Bangladesh, the situation is shifting very rapidly. Now the status of English has changed from being a foreign language to a second language. But is the change enough to deal with changing global circumstances? In this time of change, attitudes towards English language need to be altered to keep pace with the world. A CLT approach in classrooms could begin to bring about desired outcomes if it is blended with critical literacy. Communicative approaches to language learning can be developed to encourage the growth of citizens who will be globally accepted at the same time as they uphold their own identity, and will also be able to negotiate power relationships while they respect others' positions. So it is high time to change the focus of learning English language in Bangladesh to survive efficiently in this modern world.

There are many challenges to both learners and teachers in Bangladeshi mainstream classrooms because of the structural irregularities within English, the words borrowed from other languages, and the consequent different phonological representations. These constraints make the learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) more challenging. However, support has been developed to facilitate more successful learning (Anderson, 2008; Lu & Berg, 2008; May, 2002; Safford & Costley, 2008; Sirota & Bailey, 2009).

There is a need for teachers to pay attention to students' existing experiences both inside and outside the classroom in order to reduce the fear about communication. EAL (English as an Additional Language) students are very often underestimated by teachers and other students as their level of English is much below others, although they are well experienced and educated in their native language and culture. Underestimating their worth silences or slows, and even brings forth a negative outcome in, learners' performances. Teachers need to imagine what the classroom looks and sounds like from the student's point of view in order to select appropriate methodology for teaching (Safford & Costley, 2008). This includes a careful consideration of the different linguistic and cultural starting points for different learners so that "creativity and difference [in language production] are seen as normal and as productive" (Kress, 2003, p. 120), "rather than [as] barriers to academic successes" (Safford & Costley, 2008, p. 149).

The Changing Trend of ELT Methodology in the Bangladeshi Classroom

The methodology of teaching is a key factor in ELT classrooms, and the real power has always been in the hands of the teacher. English is still treated as a subject to be taught, not a skill to be mastered. The traditional ELT methods like Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, and Situational Language Teaching are in no way beneficial to the students in the changed scenario where the majority of students are desperate to learn English only to be communicatively competent. We can see that in the 1950s, the classroom was dominated by traditional methods, the most popular ones being the Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, and Audio-lingual Method. At that time, careful analyses were made based on the grammar of the target language. Then in the 1980s, the communicative approach made its entry with the evolution of more interactive views of language teaching where the principle was to learn a language by using it. This changing trend in the methodology of teaching can be seen as a positive response to the changing needs of the learners.

Communicative Language Teaching

In the late 1970s education, it is observed that students could produce sentences accurately but could not use them appropriately (Widdowson, 1978). During the 1980s and 1990s, approaches emerged which concentrated on the fundamentally communicative functions of language and language classrooms were characterized by attempts to ensure the authenticity of materials and comprehend the pragmatic aspects of language tasks. In fact, CLT came into existence as a result of dissatisfaction with the Grammar Translation and Audio Lingual methods (Hossen, 2008).

Communicative competence was a concept introduced by Dell Hymes (1966) which had been redefined later by many others. Hymes's original idea was that speakers of a language must have more than grammatical competence to communicate effectively in a language. The proponent of Systemic Functional Grammar, Michael Halliday, has also contributed to the development of CLT (Celce-Murcia, 1991).

The prominent features of CLT can be laid out as below:

- a) CLT is learner-centered.
- b) CLT emphasizes learning communication rather than grammar.
- c) CLT encourages "fluency and appropriateness" rather than "accuracy."
- d) CLT's objective is the development of communicative competence and not linguistic competence.
- e) CLT concentrates more on the message than meaning.
- f) CLT is task-based.
- g) CLT encourages individualized learning.

The Introduction of CLT in Bangladesh

CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) replaced GTM (Grammar Translation Method) at the higher secondary level in Bangladesh in 2001. This replacement of the ELT method was a significant change in the English curriculum. The key purpose of learning English at this level has been defined as to become proficient in communication for different purposes. One

of these, for example, is to interact with native or nonnative speakers for accessing higher education sectors. Besides, English proficiency is a vital issue in terms of higher studies abroad as well as for working in multinational, foreign, and even national companies. In job recruitments, priority is given to those who have excellent command in English. In order to meet these purposes of learning English, the Ministry of Education in Bangladesh has included English as a core and compulsory subject in the curriculum from years 1-12.

The government's expectation in replacing GTM with CLT was that students would become more proficient in communicative English. In other words, the desire to make students competent in communication provided further impetus for the change in the teaching method. Nevertheless, this replacement of GTM is a significant change in English curriculum in higher secondary education. The English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) – supported by both the Bangladeshi Government and the UK Department for International Development (UKDFID) – embedded the CLT approach in the English curriculum. The National Textbook Curriculum Board Bangladesh also worked in collaboration with ELTIP to incorporate CLT in the higher secondary English curriculum in Bangladesh.

The Current Situation of CLT in Bangladesh

CLT as a new English curriculum in Bangladesh does not seem to be successful since students cannot communicate efficiently in English. The general view is that the use of CLT in Bangladesh is only written in the curriculum while no practical use of it is obvious either inside or outside the classroom. It appears that the teachers have not coped with the CLT approach as they still employ the traditional GTM for teaching. At the same time, there has been a mushroom growth of private institutions offering courses for English proficiency for multiple purposes from clearing the IELTS to speaking fluently. The Internet has also played a major role in creating a resource-rich environment by giving a wide range of exposure to English. All these contextual changes in Bangladesh have affected the teaching of English language in the country, perhaps positively, showing hopeful signs of modification in the curriculum.

In spite of all these developments in the teaching of English language and the popularity of CLT as a comprehensive approach in many parts of the country, there are many regions in Bangladesh where English language still faces a precarious situation. It is the need of the hour to change the existing syllabi and reframe the new ones by following the CLT approach on a pan-Bangladesh level.

The literature also suggests that teachers must be familiar with the different strategies used by different students. Schools should adjust their curriculum to fit the needs of both male and female students as well as students from different geographical backgrounds, and support them to use different learning strategies when learning English. Although in Bangladesh classrooms are not packed with multicultural students, there are differences in socio-economic levels and cultural background across Bangladesh. So it is equally important for Bangladeshi teachers to be aware of the different learning strategies depending on students' gender and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

In the area of ELT in Bangladesh, as discussed above, though CLT faces a lot of impediments to its successful implementation, the road to success is still open. The whole process of curriculum change is riddled with time-consuming procedures in Bangladesh which has resulted in CLT's limited success, yet it has not been removed from courses. This, in the long run, has been for the better. This is because while on the one hand, the teachers have been able to familiarize themselves with its approach and methodology, the changed and changing context has encouraged its growing success today. However, the most significant impact of this approach can be felt when its sensitivity to learners' needs and responses is acknowledged fully. This sensitivity appears often to be absent in the ELT practices in Bangladesh. Therefore, it is essential to reconstruct the ELT methodology of the country with a view to making it effective by taking the local and contextual features into account.

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