

Teachers' Awareness and Current Practice of Communicative Activities in Bangladeshi Universities

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Abstract: Many applied linguists and researchers regard Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as one of the most effective approaches to ELT and they have experienced that the variety of activities (e.g. warming-up exercises, interviews, games, role plays, simulations, problem-solving tasks, ranking exercises) compatible with a communicative approach is unlimited. Such activities engage learners in communication and offer them an opportunity to practice their communication skills meaningfully in different contexts and by taking on different roles. Bangladesh embraced Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the 1990s in order to improve the declining standards of English in the country and it is most likely that when asked to name the methodology the teachers make use of in their classrooms, the majority of language teachers today assert "communicative" as the methodology of choice. But the question is how far the teachers have practiced communicative activities in the class and how they experience it while practicing it in the classroom. Hence, this paper will present teachers' awareness and current practice of communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities. In addition, it will try to focus on some potential problems of using communicative activities in Bangladesh context and suggest ways of overcoming limitations to cope with the context. It is based on a questionnaire which looked at classroom procedures teachers currently use as part of their English language teaching.

1. Introduction

Research suggests that the current English curriculum at tertiary level in Bangladesh emphasizes a *communicative* approach to ELT, highlighting the importance of meaningful communication for learning English more effectively. Before discussing the survey and its results, I would like to describe briefly how I became interested in the topic, and why I felt it important to find out teachers' awareness and views about the practice of communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities.

As a full-time EFL teacher in Bangladesh, I have found that most English language teachers in university today assert "communicative" as the methodology of choice and they try to practice the major communicative

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activities in the classroom. As it has become a trend to use CLT, I found it might be useful to know about teachers' awareness and current practice of communicative activities in English language courses at Bangladeshi universities.

I am particularly interested in the practice of communicative activities because the major objective of CLT includes development of learners' communicative competence which largely depends on the successful use of classroom activities as Richards and Rodgers (2001) identified that CLT starts with a theory of language as communication, and its goal is to develop learners' communicative competence.

In addition, I am also interested in knowing about how far they are comfortable about practicing these activities in English language classroom. Thus, the present study is vital to facilitate positive changes in English teaching as well as to provide local practitioners real assistance.

To conclude the discussion, some strategies to overcome contextual constraints are then discussed and some practical suggestions put forth to inspire classroom teachers to use communicative activities by way of integration of linguistic macro-skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening).

2. Literature Review

There have been revolutionary changes in ideas about language teaching methodology over the last 50 years or so. CLT as a feasible approach has spurred a re-evaluation of approaches with its unlimited communicative activities which help learners to develop their communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) identified grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence as part of communicative competence.

In CLT, meaning is given prime importance, which is achieved through interaction between reader and writer, and through negotiation between speaker and listener. There is a variety of communicative activities which offer learners an opportunity to practice their communication skills meaningfully in different contexts and by taking on different roles. Paulston and Bruder (1976), for example, in their book *Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures* classified the activity types that they thought were of maximum benefit in enabling students to attain communicative competence into the four categories below:

- 1) *Social Formulas and Dialogs*
- 2) *Community Oriented Tasks*
- 3) *Problem-Solving Activities*
- 4) *Role Plays*

Other two activity types that help the teacher in making up communicative activities can be listed as follow:

A. Information gap exercises force the participants to exchange information in order to find a solution (e.g. reconstitute a text, solve a puzzle, write a summary, guessing games, jigsaw tasks, problem-solving activities).

B. Opinion gaps are created by exercises incorporating controversial texts or ideas, which require the participants to describe and perhaps defend their views on these ideas (e.g. ranking exercises, values clarification techniques, thinking strategies, discussion games, etc.).

A number of research studies have been conducted and much effort has been put into discussion on the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English as a foreign language (EFL) country (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Ellis, 1996; Li, 1998; Xiaoju, 1984).

Savignon in her article states that, in Germany, for example, language teaching methodologists took the lead in developing communicative classroom materials that encouraged learner choice (Candlin, 1978). Their systematic collection of exercise types for communicatively oriented language teaching was used in teacher in-service courses and workshops to guide curriculum changes (Peipho, 1974 and Bredella, 1976, cited in Savignon).

It has been argued by researchers and writers that taking a set of teaching methods developed in one part of the world and using it in another part brings about problems and challenges (Holliday, 1994; Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996; Pennycook, 1989, in Karim 2004). According to these authors, education is bound to a particular cultural environment, and good teaching practices are socially constructed in this environment.

In another significant study, Li (1998) looked into Korean teachers' perceptions of the implementation of CLT. The results of Li's study confirmed that the teachers encountered difficulties in using CLT practices in their classes. The difficulties reported by the Korean teachers were divided into the following categories:

1. Difficulties caused by teachers:

- Deficiency in spoken English,
- Lack of training in CLT,
- Little time for and expertise in material development

2. Difficulties caused by students:

- Low English proficiency,
- Little motivation for communicative competence,
- Resistance to class participation

According to Li (1998), teachers were reluctant to implement CLT in their language classrooms due to these problems listed above.

Finally, a case study conducted by Incecay and Incecay (2009) investigated that students benefited from CLT if communicative and non-communicative activities were combined in English classrooms. That is, aligning CLT with traditional teaching practices seemed to be beneficial for EFL students.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), as cited by Aleixo (2003), teachers should assist students in identifying and understanding the value of communicative activities for their communicative competence development and this period of adjustment will help students become more familiar with CLT, and, in consequence, allow them to benefit more from its activities.

Until now, more research work has been carried out on teachers' perceptions and much effort has been put into discussion on the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in English as a foreign language (EFL) country recently than on teachers' awareness and practice of various communicative activities in EFL classroom. (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Ellis, 1996; Li, 1998; Xiaoju, 1984) Therefore, my research will try to focus on this particular area.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study investigates teachers' awareness and current practice of communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities. The primary focus of this study is on teachers and their awareness in the practice of communicative activities in Bangladeshi university teaching and the research questions for this study are:

- a) To what extent are the teachers aware of practicing communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities?
- b) What do the teachers think are the common challenges that they are confronted with about the current practice of communicative activities?

Since the study depends mostly on teachers' self reported opinions, personal feelings, and experiences about the practice of communicative activities in Bangladeshi university classrooms, a survey research design was selected and the research was based on written survey questionnaires for teachers. Because of time constraint I had to depend on questionnaire only as according to Wiersma (1995, in Karim, 2004), as cited by Scott (2001), and compared to interviews

with the teachers, the questionnaire is more relaxing and it examines the teachers' approaches to teaching more accurately. Therefore, I found it important to use a qualitative research approach because of the much dependence on individual teacher's perceptions and experiences of a particular language teaching situation. Moreover, according to Marshall and Rossman (1999, in Karim, 2004), one of the significant reasons for selecting qualitative research is "to stress the unique strengths of the genre for research that is exploratory or descriptive" (p. 60). In most of the academic fields of study qualitative research has been well established. According to Aleixo (2003), it has a unique approach to research that draws mostly on multiple sources and on people's views and opinions of specific experiences.

3.2 Questionnaire

In order to elicit data a written questionnaire administered to EFL teachers in Bangladesh was used as a main instrument. According to LeCompte and Gotez (1982, in Karim, 2004), as cited by Scott (2001), "scientific traditions, such as the survey method, focus on a small number of questions that are constructed before data collection and cover a wide range of elements" (p. 14). The questionnaire included 12 questions with both open-ended and questions with fixed alternatives along with comments. In order to check the comprehensiveness, clarity, and representativeness of the interview questionnaire a pilot testing was conducted.

3.3 Participants and Setting

All the participants in this study are university-level EFL teachers and a total of 10 EFL teachers participated in the research. All the participants are between 26-50 years of age. They work at one of the seven universities located in Dhaka, Bangladesh, from where I have collected data. The seven universities selected for the study are: North South University (NSU), American International University Bangladesh (AIUB), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), Northern University Bangladesh (NUB), The University of Asia Pacific (UAP), Jagannath University (JNU) and Eastern University (EU).

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Results and Analysis

We can begin by looking at the questions of *section A* relating to teachers' view about communicative language teaching methodology. The basic questions in *section A* were:

Table: 1**Section A**

<i>1. Have you tried Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in your classes?</i>		
Yes	No	Total respondents
9	1	10
Teacher 2	<i>Comment: Using CLT depends on which course one is teaching. I teach course no: 103-where the main focus is writing. So perhaps I do not use CLT as frequently as teachers who teach course: 101 and 102 where the focus is on different skills.</i>	
Teacher 3	<i>Comment: I've never been happy with those classes. Students do not like to respond or communicate.</i>	
Teacher 7	<i>Comment: It is learner centred and effective.</i>	

It appears from the data that all the teachers participated in the survey, practise CLT in their English language classes except teacher 5, who responded to question 2 (discussed below) stating that she tried out communicative activities whenever it was possible which was contradictory. Teacher 2 shares her perception of communicative activities that correspond with her reported classroom practice. Teacher 3 shares his experience about communicative classroom pointing out students' reluctance in communication. Teacher 7 found CLT learner centred and effective as another feature of CLT is "its learner-centered and experience-based view of second language teaching" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 69).

Table: 2

<i>2. Why did you or why didn't you try CLT?</i>	
Teacher 1	<i>I tried it because the syllabus focused CLT</i>
Teacher 2	<i>Students enjoy communicative activities. They learn without being fully conscious that they are learning; besides, when students speak, I feel that I get the opportunity to learn something from them too.</i>
Teacher 3	<i>I thought that the students will find it very interesting</i>
Teacher 4	<i>I thought it would help the students participate more in classroom discussion and activity</i>
Teacher 5	<i>In most cases I have to take large classes (more than 30 students) of mixed level. Besides, I have to cover a fixed syllabus containing a lot of</i>

	<i>topics. Adopting CLT is not always convenient. However, I try to engage my students in communicative activities whenever it's possible.</i>
Teacher 7	<i>I tried CLT since it is task-based and interesting in terms of student engagement. it makes student feel more interested to participate in language drilling</i>
Teacher 8	<i>I believe that the students will learn the language more authentically, if we use CLT in the classroom. However, because of large classes and limited timeframe, always it is not possible to follow CLT.</i>
Teacher 9	<i>To ease language learning process.</i>
Teacher 10	<i>I try it because I believe communicative activities can engage learners and therefore they enjoy learning. As it focuses on meaning students can develop their communicative competence through practicing meaning based activities.</i>

There appears to be a consensus that most teachers participated in the survey are supposed to be aware of using communicative activities in English language teaching classroom, and on closer inspection, it seems that almost all of them found these activities to be effective and stimulating for students.

Here in *section A*, however, we see the value of having both quantitative and qualitative data, because consideration of the comments teachers made suggests that in spite of their interest and awareness of practicing communicative activities they are not able to use it properly due to difficulties and challenges in practicing the activities in Bangladeshi context.

Section B

3. To what extent do you use the following communicative activities?

	always	often	sometimes	rarely	never
a. Warming-up exercises	2	4	3	1	
b. Interviews		3	5	1	1
c. Guessing games		3	6	1	
d. Jigsaw tasks		2	2	3	3
e. Questioning activities	4	6			
f. Ranking exercises		2	5		3
g. Discussion games	2	3	3	1	1
h. Values clarification	2		1	2	5

technique					
i.Thinking strategies, i.e. brainstorming	6	2	2		
j.Problem-solving activities	5	4	1		
k.Miming		1	2	2	5
l.Role play	1	6	1	1	1
m.Simulation		3	1	5	1
n.Chain story/ picture stories	1	2	4	2	1

Table: 3

Question 3 was designed to elicit teachers' awareness of practicing various activities associated with communicative approaches to English language teaching. To determine teachers' present practice of communicative activities, a list of fourteen items, all pertaining to common features of CLT activities, was presented. Findings from this question reflect the interaction of teachers' effort with teaching practices.

The communicative activities the majority of teachers reported "they use always" are:

	always
e.Questioning activities	40%
i.Thinking strategies, i.e. brainstorming	60%
j.Problem-solving activities	50%

Table: 4

These three most frequently reported activities that the teachers *always* use demonstrate that they are very much aware of practicing communicative activities in English language classroom inspite of having few difficulties that have been identified by them. The activities teachers most frequently selected as "often" are *Warming-up exercises* (40%), *Questioning activities* (60%), *Problem-solving activities* (40%) and *Role play* (60%). The activities teachers most frequently selected as "sometimes" are *Interviews* (50%), *Guessing games* (60%), *Ranking exercises* (50%), and *Chain story/ picture stories* (40%).

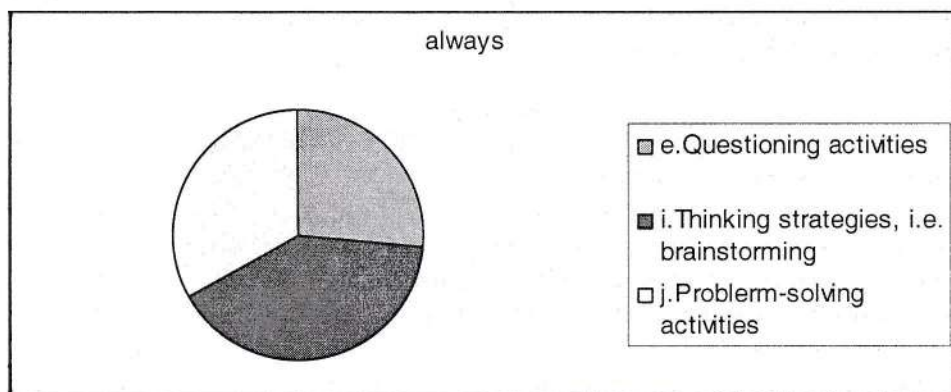


Figure: 1

These eleven most frequently reported activities are commonly referred to in descriptions of communicative teaching activities which demonstrate that there are positive indications that Bangladeshi EFL teachers are well aware of various communicative activities and they practice the major communicative activities in the classroom. Paulston and Bruder (1976), in their book *Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures* classified these activity types were of maximum benefit in enabling students to attain communicative competence.

The activities teachers most frequently selected as 'rarely' are *Jigsaw tasks* (30%) and *Simulation* (rarely 50%). It is possible that the teachers are aware of these communicative activities but possibly because they know that participants in *jigsaw tasks* have to do a lot of talking before they are able to fit the pieces together in the right way and it is obvious that this entails a large amount of practice in the foreign language, especially in language functions like suggesting, agreeing and disagreeing, determining sequence, etc. So, it is likely that teachers might have difficulty in managing discipline in learners with low level language when they use these in the classroom.

Another thing is that as the language elements required by *jigsaw tasks* are not available at beginners' level, this type of activity is best used with intermediate and more advanced students (Klippel, 1984). This also might discourage the teachers in practicing *jigsaw tasks* who teach students with low English proficiency.

In the case of the activity *Simulation* (rarely 50%), it seems that the teachers might think that this activity is not suitable for the maturity level of learners, and students' level of English proficiency is not sufficient to use this communicative activity in the class as Klippel (1984) identified that *Simulations* are more highly structured and contain more diverse elements in their content and procedure. This

analysis is further justified by the analysis of teachers' response of item 8 and 12 under question 4.

Section C

Question 4 was designed to find out which difficulties teachers confronted in practicing communicative activities in their classes and what they think might cause difficulties for them in practicing communicative activities in Bangladesh. The perceived difficulties listed in the question were selected from research literature, which identified probable causes of difficulties in practicing communicative activities while investigating the CLT situations in other EFL countries. (Karim, 2004)

4. The following are some difficulties that other EFL teachers encountered in practicing communicative activities in EFL classroom. Did you come across these difficulties or do you think they might be difficulties for you in practicing communicative activities while teaching English in Bangladeshi universities?

You are given choice of 1-5. In each case 5=strongly agree 4=agree 3=not sure 2=disagree 1=strongly disagree

Sl.no	Statements	5	4	3	2	1
4	There is much opportunity for teachers to be familiar with various communicative activities through CLT training.	4	5		1	
5	Teachers' proficiency in spoken English is sufficient for using various communicative activities.	1	2	1	5	1
6	Teachers are able to afford sufficient time for developing CLT appropriate communicative classroom materials		2	3	4	1
7	Teachers can manage discipline in learners with low level language when he/she conducts student-oriented communicative activities such as group work, pair work, games, etc.		6		2	2
8	students' level of English proficiency is sufficient to use communicative activities in the class		2		7	1
9	Students resist participating in communicative class activities.	2	2	1	4	1
10	Students have a positive style of learning through communicative activities	2	5		2	1
11	Classes are spacious enough for the effective use of communicative activities.		1		5	4
12	Most communicative activities are not suitable for the maturity level of learners	2	2		6	

Table: 5

The major problems that the respondents reported in practicing communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities included:

- *Teachers' lack of sufficient proficiency in spoken English*
- *Teachers' little time to prepare communicative materials*
- *Small classroom*
- *Students' poor communicative abilities.*

Table 6 summarizes the data pertinent to inherent problems of practicing communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities, which will then be discussed item by item.

Problems inherent in practicing communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities:

Statements	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	total
5. Teachers' proficiency in spoken English is sufficient for using various communicative activities.	5	1	10
6. Teachers are able to afford sufficient time for developing CLT appropriate communicative classroom materials	4	1	
8. students' level of English proficiency is sufficient to use communicative activities in the class	7	1	
11. Classes are spacious enough for the effective use of communicative activities.	5	4	

Table: 6

- **Teacher-related Difficulties and Challenges**

- i. **Teachers' lack of sufficient proficiency in spoken English**

It goes without saying that teachers' deficiency in spoken English creates a great deal of difficulty if they are to use various communicative activities which entail a large amount of practice in the foreign language and if the objective of the class is to teach students how to speak the language. One of the main reasons for this can be attributed to the traditional ways of learning English in Bangladesh. Broadly speaking, these Bangladeshi teachers had few opportunities to practice English as they were learning it. The majority of the participants predominantly

experienced the Grammar Translation (GT) method as they were learners of English.

ii. Lack of time for developing communicative materials

4 out of 10 teachers agreed that (*item no. 6, Q. 4: disagree 4/ strongly disagree 1/ not sure 3*) they are not able to afford sufficient time for developing CLT appropriate classroom materials which indicates that CLT requires a lot of time to prepare classroom materials. This is also obvious in Li's (1998) study where teachers marked lack of sufficient time for developing communicative materials to be a constraint to practice CLT. Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) also discovered that Japanese teachers believed traditional practices in their class because they thought CLT used time consuming activities. However, the response "not sure" by thirty percent teachers may indicate that they did not feel any time constraint regarding preparing CLT materials or it did not discourage them from practicing CLT in the classroom.

• Student-related Difficulties and Challenges

iii. Students' low English proficiency

The majority teachers considered students' low level English proficiency as a major difficulty to practice communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities. But the paradox is that it is assumed that communicative activities should be implemented in English language teaching with a view to improving students' English proficiency.

• Difficulties and Challenges Related to the Educational System

iv. Small classes

Having too many students in small classes is one of the key problems in the Bangladeshi educational system in general. This finding fits to Li's (1998) discovery that Korean teachers found it very difficult to use CLT with so many students in one classroom. The questionnaire data revealed that the high number of students in classes was also a serious concern in practicing communicative activities in Bangladeshi English classes. Majority teachers (*item no. 11, Q. 4: disagree 5/ strongly disagree 4*) considered this as a major challenge.

6. Discussion and Recommendation

i. Teachers' lack of sufficient proficiency in spoken English

Most of the teachers agreed that *there is much opportunity for teachers to be familiar with various communicative activities through CLT training (strongly agree 4/ agree 5)* which can really support those who lack sufficient proficiency in spoken English. The teachers may believe that although teachers' insufficient proficiency in spoken English can create some difficulties in practicing *various communicative activities*, those difficulties might be manageable in Bangladeshi EFL context through *CLT training*.

ii. CLT appropriate classroom materials

Although 40% teachers agreed that they are not able to afford sufficient time for developing CLT appropriate classroom materials there is clearly a feeling among a small number of teachers (20%) that they can manage time for preparing materials. The high number of 'unsures' (30%) suggests uncertainty about the real picture. As an EFL teacher in Bangladesh what I think is that the teachers who opted for "teachers' insufficient time for preparing communicative materials" believe that few universities put heavy workload on teachers which is directly related to the shortage of efficient English teachers in Bangladesh. Given that their income is not encouraging for demonstrating hard work, many teachers tend to lose their motivation to teach English in most effective ways. But what I believe is that proper teacher training can solve this problem.

iii. Students' low level English proficiency

The majority teachers in this study considered students' low level English proficiency as a major difficulty in practicing communicative activities in universities. To me, teachers should always bear in mind that implementation and change should have a purpose to improve students' level whatever it is. However, this finding very much relates to Li's (1998) findings where teachers identified that student's low English proficiency creates difficulty in practicing CLT.

As far as Bangladeshi education is concerned, students are usually familiar with traditional grammar based teaching in their secondary and higher secondary education, and consequently, when they enroll in post secondary level at university their acquired system of rote learning bars them to adapt to communicative classroom learning. Even as an EFL teacher in Bangladesh I used to find it difficult to perform oral interaction and other communicative activities in the classroom. However, this was usually the case with beginner level students for whom CLT was really something new to begin with. The positive thing was that students used to become adapted to CLT within a few weeks of their starting. I should also add that my overall communicative practices was not hampered due to students' low level English proficiency, which indicates that their low level English might not have negative impact on the success of CLT, rather CLT can help to improve their English.

iv. Small Classes

The majority teachers (*item no. 11, Q. 4: disagree 5/ strongly disagree 4*) reported that "small Class" is a major difficulty in practicing communicative activities in Bangladeshi universities. My personal experience will report that most of the EFL classes in universities are well-equipped with multimedia and OHP but inconvenient in a sense that large number of students and immovable desks and chairs hinder the maximum student participation and successful implementation of communicative activities like role-play, group-work and

games. According to Li (1998) novice teachers should have opportunities to get hands-on experience with and gain confidence in using communicative activities. Moreover, training on pedagogical planning, classroom learning systems, dealing with student behavior, or discipline management can help teachers to deal with large classes.

7. Conclusion

As seen in the study, CLT is in practice for quite some time in Bangladesh but a number of constraints have made it difficult for CLT to be integrated into English teaching classrooms in Bangladesh. One of the main reasons is that teachers lack the time and energy to devise communicative teaching materials and activities due to their heavy workload. Thus, the first implication of the study is that teachers' heavy workload should be decreased, and thus their work conditions should be improved. Again as far as CLT is concerned Communicative intent should always be given a prime position in every CLT activity. So, the second implication of the study is, in our communicative class, students should be provided with opportunities to use the language a great deal through various communicative activities.

Furthermore, in the process of effective integration of CLT into English teaching in Bangladesh, special attention should be paid to teacher training. Markee (2001) puts forward that teachers can more easily change their values and help bring about deeper changes if they understand why there is the need to change (p. 120). Therefore, the most imperative and effective way to practice communicative activities is to provide in-service teachers with opportunities to retrain themselves in CLT. When the teachers better understand the principles of CLT, as well as explore how it works in English language classrooms, they can meet the demands of CLT more effectively and feel motivated to overcome the potential constraints in the use of CLT. The present study confirmed that Bangladeshi EFL teachers are very much aware of using communicative activities, and in order to support them, a special emphasis on professional development would be valuable for the teachers.

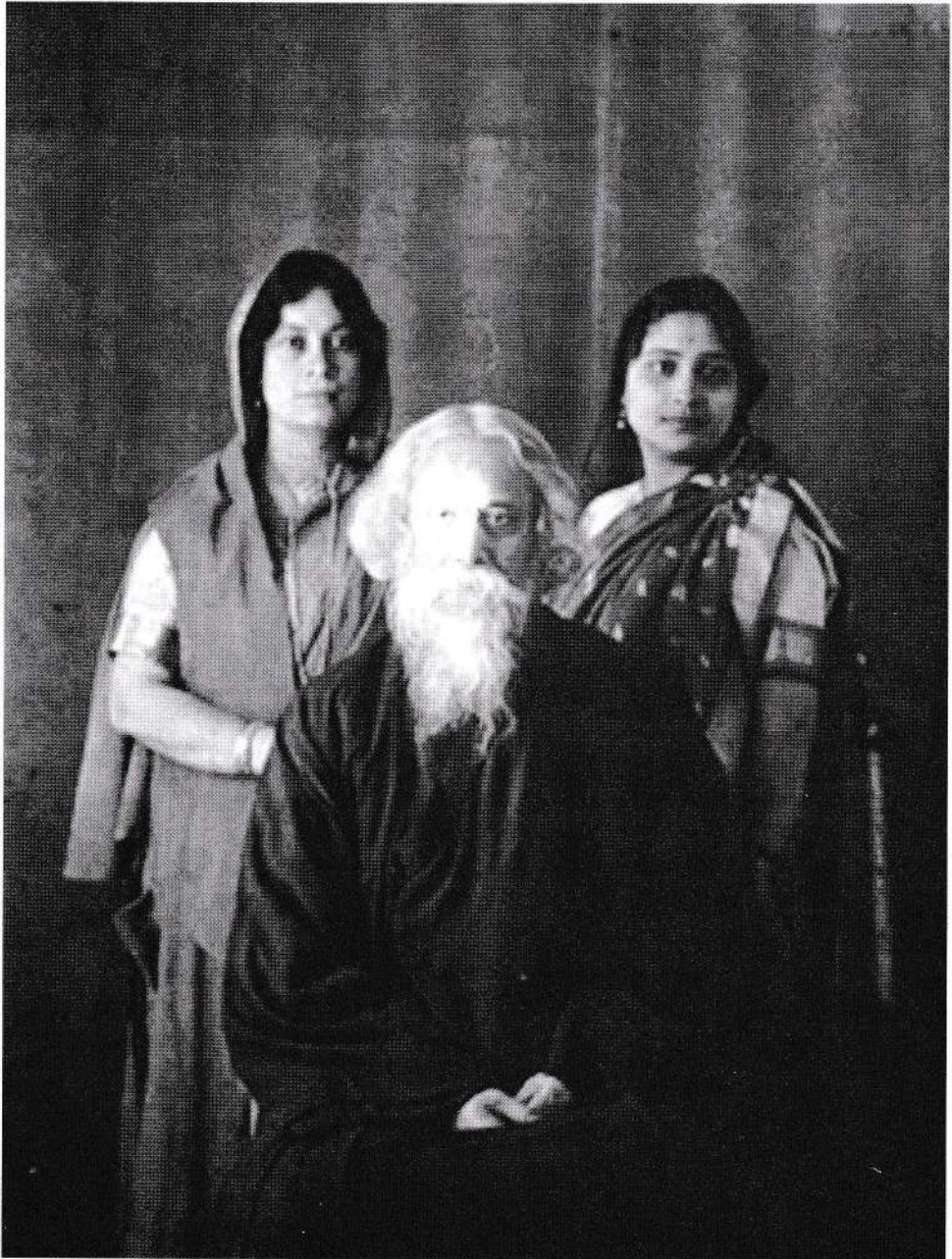
8. Limitations of the study

There are a number of limitations of this study. The first limitation is related to the sample size. It should be noted that the sample size is not large enough to draw generalized conclusions. The themes and patterns emerged in this study should be considered as hypotheses to be tested in future studies conducted with larger groups.

A further limitation of this study can be attributed to the subjectivity of the teachers' perspectives. It should be noted that teachers may have been subjective in their responses. Therefore, their actual classroom practices may be dissimilar to the principles they reported in the questionnaire and the interviews.

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Rabindranath Tagore with his family.