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A DECISIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG THE PRIVATE UNIVERSITY FRESHMEN IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

As a language, English has received the respect and prestige to be used in almost everywhere, even where English is not the second language, especially in this subcontinent where the education system provides an enormous focus on learning English; but in a country like Bangladesh, as this study finds, the students are still poor in learning English and as a result, they face serious problems in communicating in English. In spite of the high passing rate in the SSC and HSC students are found reasonably weak in English. Many employers complain over the fact that the recruited freshmen, in most of the cases, are found inefficient in English. So, to have a sound knowledge about the English language proficiency that can help the universities to re-shape their current outcome based curriculum and education system (to some extent, at the least) is necessary. This research paper tries to analyse and have an insight into the present scenario using primary and secondary sources through a questionnaire of 24 statements with a Likert scale, interviews of the students and faculty members, and academic results, so that the authorities may devise plans to delve into the situation; and for this, some recommendations are provided based on the findings of the study.

Keywords: *Undergraduates, level of proficiency, private university, academic results*

1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, the private universities have adopted English as the medium of instruction, because it is now the source of a great deal of world's knowledge. Even at primary level and higher secondary level English is a compulsory subject in Bangladesh, though the medium of teaching is not always English. However, the present scenario does not reflect what is expected from the students. In fact, most of the students at the tertiary level, especially in the private universities, do not show a strong command over English. Most of the private universities offer various courses related to English language, focusing on different skills of the language, but the outcome is not always satisfactory. After completing ten years of compulsory English in schools and colleges, if the proficiency level of the students does not get to the standard level, it is probably not wise to expect them to show dramatic improvement by completing only a few courses in the university.

Another fact to be noted here is that most of the students in Bangladesh get admitted into universities after completing their SSC and HSC in Bangla medium and at the university they have to cope up with the new medium of instruction, i.e. English. In spite of knowing about it beforehand; when they sit in the classroom and listen to the lectures (in English), it makes them nervous. The teachers also agree that the academic results of the freshmen improve after two or three semesters. Though the academic results improve over time, but the proficiency in English

does not. Because, though, at the beginning students are offered various courses for improving their English skills, but later on it rests on the students' personal interest and willingness only. Some universities provide/allow various activities to be carried out in English, but still they fall short of reaching to the intended target. This paper tries to point out the specific areas where the core problems or complexities lie and where effective improvements can be made.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are to observe the general proficiency level in English of the private-university students in Bangladesh, to determine the implications of the study to English-Language-education system in the private universities and to determine what effective measures can be taken to strengthen the current scenario of the proficiency level of the university freshmen within the current structure of education.

3. Literature Review

Four basic skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing are considered as the key indicators of recognizing one's proficiency in a language. Among them, writing is both a physical and mental act. Nunan (2003) states, "At the most basic level, writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to some medium. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express them, and organizing them into statements and paragraphs that will be clear to a reader". People learn mother tongue through acquisition, but for second language or foreign language, it is a difficult task and it takes a remarkable amount of time and effort to have sufficient command over that language. In his study, Uddin (2014) finds, "writing is the most focused but the least developed English language skill among the learners in Bangladesh. At tertiary level the situation is not different". For other skills, the scenario is the same.

If a student is good in English, it promises to provide various choices in his future as one student stated: "[we] need it [because it is an] international language.... It will get us a good job, higher education, the internet, [help us] to be global, [provide] knowledge, and communication everywhere" (Rashid, 2012). Nesa (2004) finds the same thing in his study and says, English is the *lingua franca* of business, commerce, science, arts, literature of the whole world". "Therefore, learning English as second language in Bangladesh is not viewed in terms of passing school examinations only. English can provide a wider range of life choices and knowledge about the global issues, particularly if it can be used successfully outside the classroom. It is believed that learning English could bring empowerment to life".

According to Farooqui (2007), "the globalization of English and a growing demand of good English speaking skills in the job market in particular have been placing a greater emphasis on the teaching of speaking skills in Bangladesh. There is no doubt that in this communication oriented age, speaking is more important than ever." But in many ways it is one of the marginalized skills and Bangladeshi students hardly have the scope to learn it at secondary and higher secondary levels in our country (Khan, 2007).

In spite of studying English from first to twelfth grade most of the students fail to show a great command over reading and listening too (Choi & Lee, 2008). John Schumann's theory on acculturation can help to understand the scenario. Schumann's theory is basically about "the social factors experienced by the people learning English as their second language within the mainstream culture" (Baeta et. al., 2012). According to Schumann (1986), "the degree to which a learner acculturates to the target language group will control the degree to which he acquires the second language".

Khan & Akter (2011) note in their study: "in our teaching-learning context, writing skill is usually considered as a clear proof of whether learners learnt English well or not. Learners sit for different examinations and get grades/scores on the basis of writing ability. Although other skills are more or less practised in the class, only writing ability is assessed for grades or scores in the examinations".

Vocabulary is one key determinant of poor reading comprehension for ESL learners. Knowing a word involves learning many things of a word- its accurate meaning, its various

nuances, the sorts of syntactic constructions into which it enters, the morphological alternatives it recommends, and a rich assortment of semantic connections, including synonyms, hyponyms and words with intimately allied yet contrasting meanings as well as its capacity for polysemy (Carlo et. al., 2004).

As all the university freshmen have to read the books written in English and listen to the lectures delivered in English: at the beginning, they find it very difficult, but the teachers agree to the fact that students comparatively develop these skills first, but still not being up to the mark.

4. Methodology

The key-participants of this study were 385 students from 11 (eleven) different private universities from all over Bangladesh. Among them 280 students were freshmen and 105 students had just completed their first semester in their respective universities. During the survey all the students were either had the fundamental English courses or they would be offered those courses in the next semester. A semi-structured interview is conducted with 14 teachers from various backgrounds who are currently teaching the freshmen. Four of the teachers are senior lecturers and the others are lecturers. The interviews were mostly informal. Among the students, 223 students are male and 162 students are female. The age of the students ranges from 20 to 23 years. They were provided a questionnaire of 24 (twenty four) close ended statements containing Likert scale (5 to 1) where 5 represents 'strongly agree', 4 agree, 3 undecided, 2 disagree, 1 strongly disagree.

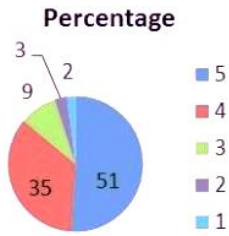
Before distributing the questionnaire, students were informed about the significance of the survey and they were requested to evaluate their statements sincerely. Among the students who attended the survey, the researcher chose three students randomly to take their interviews on the various aspects of the survey questionnaire. One open ended question was included in the survey and they were asked to opine about the survey in the questionnaire. 3 (three) students (in some cases 4) were randomly selected in each of the universities for the purpose of informal interviewing. Data were collected through questionnaire, interviews and first semester exam results of the students. The participants were told that writing their name was not mandatory and in any case their names would be kept confidential. The statements in the questionnaire were designed to gather students' perceptions of their knowledge of the four basic skills, i.e., speaking, listening, writing and reading. The result of the survey, conducted among the participants, was counted into percentage.

14 (fourteen) teachers from various universities (teaching various courses) were also interviewed to take their opinions into account. They were shown some of the survey questionnaires filled up by the students and were requested to share their views on them. Academic results of two basic courses (English Fundamental and English Composition) of three batches from three universities were collected to see how the freshmen are doing in the Basic English courses in order to strengthen the purpose of the study. The documents are confidential and so, the confidentiality of the documents is maintained by not exposing the names of the universities.

5. Findings and Discussion

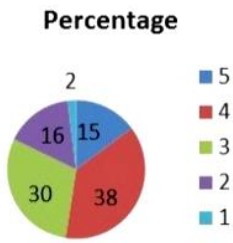
The result of the study shows that though almost all the students think that having strong command over English language is mandatory for their lives, but most of them are aware of the fact that they are not yet up to mark to excel themselves in English. The statements of the survey questionnaire are designed to see the real picture through the eyes of the students and the faculty members. So, the following table shows the analysis of each of the statements along with pie charts. In the pie chart percentage of opinions for each of the statement is shown where 5 stands for strongly agree, 4 for agree, 3 for undecided, 2 for disagree and 1 for strongly disagree. The 'analysis' segment contains comments gathered from the interviews of the students and the faculty members.

5.1. Statement 1: You consider having a strong command over English language mandatory for your life.



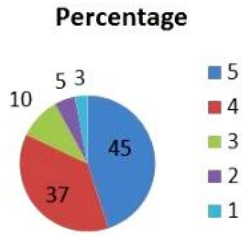
A remarkable 86% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed. They believe good command over English will allow them to get good jobs, e.g. jobs in the corporate world. Moreover, Feeling of superiority over others in the personal life depends largely on the capability of using English, e.g. browsing through the internet web pages becomes difficult for them without a good command over English. Some teachers use modern day technology, like google classroom which requires the basic knowledge of English.

5.2. Statement 2: You have sufficient command over English Language.



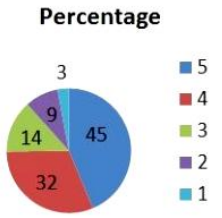
Mixed opinions were found. Only 15% strongly agreed. 38% agreed and remarkable 30% students were unsure of their ability. 16% disagreed with the statement. Most of the students do not think that they have sufficient command over the language. In fact, in the questionnaire, students were asked to share their opinion about the research topic in short, and lots of grammatical errors were found in the sentences. Only 19% students could write the sentences in correct English. Moreover, some answers were completely irrelevant to the provided question, as well. The teachers opined that sometimes, students do not know where they make mistakes and so, they think they are using correct English.

5.3. Statement 3: At your university the lectures are delivered in English.



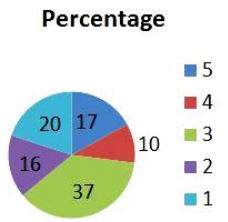
82% students either agreed or strongly agreed. In the interviews, some students said that sometimes Bangla is used to make the difficult points clear. If they do not understand something they do not feel comfortable in asking the teacher to explain the topic in Bangla. The teachers opine that just because of the language sometimes they find it difficult for the students to understand the class topic in the classroom.

5.4. Statement 4: You consider the English courses, e.g. grammar, spoken, written English (at your university) good enough to enhance your proficiency in English.



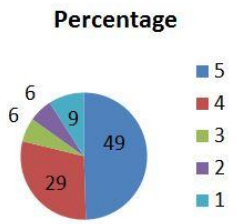
58% students either agreed or strongly agreed, the other 42% were either unsure or disagreed with the statement. Students say that English courses offered at the university are good enough to enhance their proficiency, but they do not get enough time to cope with the new environment of instruction in English. The teachers opine that those who do not succeed in enhancing their proficiency lag behind, and 'Basic English' courses are discontinued after 3 or 4 semesters.

5.5. Statement 5: You like spending time in the English Language Club (if available at your university).



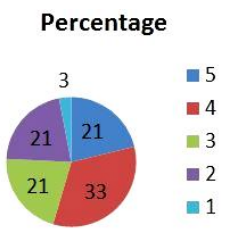
Only 17% students strongly agreed, 36% students are unsure and 35% students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Only 27% universities have full-fledged language lab. The students spend their time only if they are assigned to prepare any specific tasks. They like to spend time with friends rather than being in the lab during the free time. 72% teachers try to engage the students in English based co-curricular activities so that the students use labs or practise English outside of their course syllabus.

5.6. Statement 6: You think using audio, video or other instruments in the classrooms can help you better understand particular things.



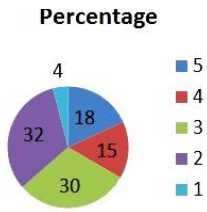
78% students either agreed or strongly agreed. Instruments like, audio, video help the students to learn the correct pronunciation. Students also say that they enjoy the class, and use of various instruments in the class make the class very interesting to them. More than 50% teachers find the students more engaged in the class when they use such instruments. Around 20% of them say that they do not like to use them in the class.

5.7. Statement 7: You can happily allocate, at least, 30 minutes per day only for learning proper English



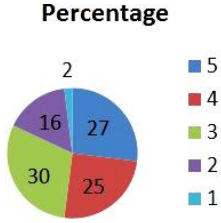
51% students can happily do so, but 42% students opined in the negative. From the interview it became clear that students want to learn proper English, but are not ready to allocate specific time of a day for the purpose. They seem to contradict themselves by saying that they will learn English with the passage of time without giving specific efforts.

5.8. Statement 8: You spend a handsome period of time doing evaluation of your current English language proficiency.



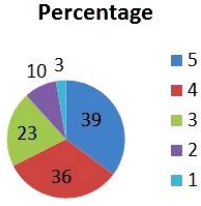
Only 33% students opined in the positive. Sometimes, they think about their current condition, but they do not carry on any regular or specific evaluation. They also say that examinations in the university are the only places for their evaluation. The teachers say that sometimes, the students take guidance from them, but in most of the cases they do not continue their personal endeavor.

5.9. Statement 9: You get enough motivation from your surroundings to improve your English skills.



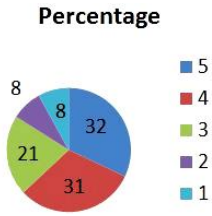
Though 52% opined in the positive, but the others were either not sure about it or disagreed. Academic results, teachers and family motivate them. And some teachers mentioned that they find students regretting about not taking English very seriously toward the end of their university academic life.

5.10. Statement 10: Nervousness affects you while speaking in English in front of others.



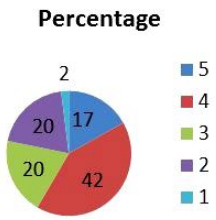
A staggering amount of students (75%) opined in the positive and 23% were unsure of the situation. Students say that they hesitate to use English in front of others. They also think that they will be laughed at if mistakes occur. Out of this fear, they tend to remain silent in the classroom. The teachers (64%) also agreed that freshmen do not feel comfortable in interacting in English.

5.11. Statement 11: You face situations, in your everyday life, where you feel- having proficiency in English would have been better.



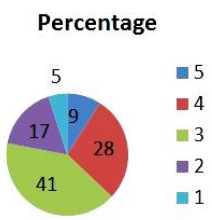
More than 60% students agreed to the statement whereas 21% were unsure. In real life situations like, operating computer, browsing internet, participating in various competitions, watching documentaries and movies, listening to music, filling up different forms, the students feel the necessity of improving the proficiency of the language

5.12. Statement 12: You can write flawlessly in English on any topic (that is familiar to you).



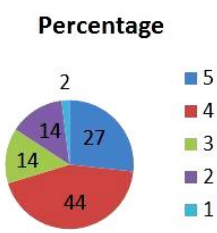
Only 17% strongly agreed and 42% agreed to the statement, but 20% were unsure and 20% opined in the negative. In the interviews, they confessed that they think they can write on any given topic, but they have to go through a lot of problems doing this. Sometimes they face problems in arranging the idea; sometimes words fall short for them. They also said that in spite of knowing the fact that they are not writing in good English, they fail to improve it. Moreover, majority of the students think in Bangla first, and then they translate that into English which kills a considerable amount of time as well. The teachers opined that grammatical and spelling mistakes are very common.

5.13. Statement 13: You can maintain coherence while speaking and writing.



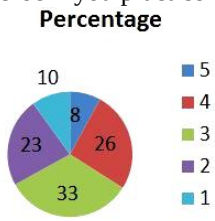
Only 9% strongly agreed, 38% agreed, but 41% were unsure and 22% opined in the negative. Interviews reveal that many of the students do not have clear idea about coherence. Some said, while speaking they try to maintain it, because, for them, it comes automatically, but while writing they can not use it properly. According to the opinion of the teachers, while writing an essay or answering in the exam script they face problems in using paragraphs for different aspects of the topic, and sometimes they fail to maintain coherence here as well.

5.14. Statement 14: You always plan for a few minutes before writing (anything).



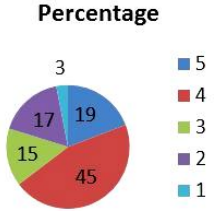
71% students opined in the positive; 14% were unsure and 16% opined in the negative. The interviews of the students reveal that before writing on a given topic, they plan for it, but only for one or two minutes. In most of the cases they plan for the beginning only, and they think that the rest of the things will come automatically. They try to organize the idea, but do not write them down and do not do drafting. 71% teachers also revealed that the answers in the exam scripts of the students lack proper planning.

5.15. Statement 15: Outside of the classroom you practice English (with friends, family etc.)



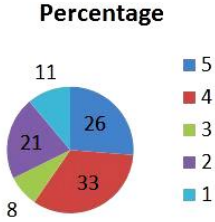
Only 34% opined in the positive. The interviews show that they use English sentences or words every now and then, but not necessarily for the purpose of practicing. Less than 40% students said that they have groups of friends with whom they practice English, especially, spoken English.

5.16. Statement 16: You focus on communicative English (where only communication matters) over proper/accurate English.



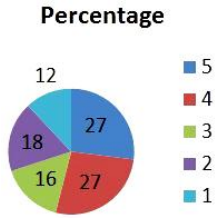
64% agreed. Students think communication is the key here, but they also think that, for writing correct English is important, but they do not focus on correcting every single mistake. All the teachers agree that their students' primary focus remains on communicative English over proper/accurate English.

5.17. Statement 17: While watching an English movie or listening to English songs you need subtitles or lyrics.



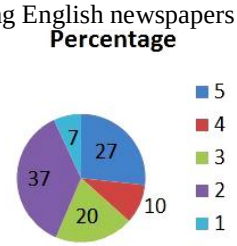
26% strongly agreed and 33% agreed to the statement. 33% students also opined in the negative. They need subtitles or lyrics, because the accent of the English people is difficult for them to understand. In the interviews, some students said that they used to use subtitles or lyrics at the beginning, but over the passage of time they have overcome the situation and now they do not need the subtitles or lyrics anymore.

5.18. Statement 18: You have read an English novel or at least, an article in the last two weeks.



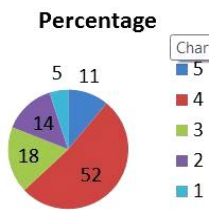
More than 50% students agreed, but 30% opined in the negative. In the interviews, only a few students said that they have read a novel or, at least, started reading a novel because they just love reading novels. Most of them do not read English Dailies. And all the students agree that they do not critically analyze the sentence structure or try to memorize the unknown words found in the English newspaper or online articles.

5.19. Statement 19: You prefer reading English newspapers over Bangla newspapers.



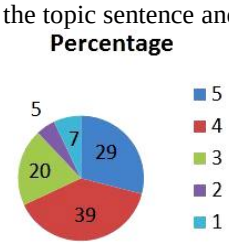
37% students agreed, but 44% disagreed and 20% were unsure. The interviews reveal, Students read English newspaper, not on a regular basis, but some of them regularly visit websites of English news portals and some find links of news or articles (in English) on Facebook, Twitter and other social media.

5.20. Statement 20: You need to read an article (written in English) more than once to understand it properly.



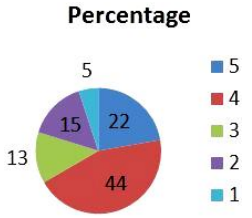
Staggering 62% students agreed. Complex and long sentences get difficult for them to understand. The interviews reveal, most of the time, they try to guess the meaning if a sentence or paragraph seems difficult to them instead of finding the meaning in a dictionary.

5.21. Statement 21: You can identify the topic sentence and theme/s after reading an article/ story.



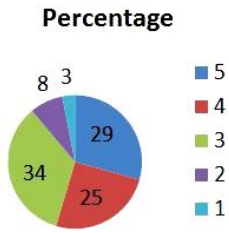
68% students opined in the positive. But, while reading or writing, they do not find it necessary to identify the topic sentence. On the contrary, 78% teachers opined that the freshmen students do not write maintaining a proper topic sentence, which results in a poor beginning of any specific writing.

5.22. Statement 22: You watch English news/serial/movie regularly.



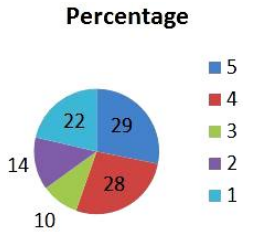
66% answered positively. From the interviews too, it became evident that watching English news or serials, movies is one of the instruments that help them improve their English language skills.

5.23. Statement 23: You understand the lectures (delivered in English) thoroughly.



54% either agreed or strongly agreed, but 34% were unsure of the statement. As the lectures are delivered in English in the universities, some students find it difficult to understand, but in such cases, they ask the teachers, or take help from their friends or request the teachers in person (outside the classroom) to clarify the point. 92% teachers agreed that in some cases, they use Bangla to clarify the complicated points in the classroom.

5.24. Statement 24: For technical subjects/courses lectures in English create problem for you to understand the subject properly.



A remarkable 57% agreed. A mixed reaction is noticed here. In the interviews, students expressed that for technical subjects mother tongue helps better than English.

6. Findings of the Academic Results

Academic results of two basic courses (English Fundamental and English Composition) of three batches (randomly selected) from three different universities were also collected.
Average mark earned in the first semester of Fall-2017 (department of English) in Basic English is 58% [number of students: 78; from three different universities (among them 19 students i.e. 24% could not pass)]. Average mark earned in the first semester of Fall-2017 (department of Computer Science and Engineering) in English Composition is 53% [number of students: 89; from three different universities (among them 18 students i.e. 20% could not pass)]. The results, as they are shown above, are not at all satisfactory, which further strengthen the purpose of this study.

7. Analyses and Interpretations

It is to be noted that the statements of the survey questionnaire are not directly divided into the 'four basic skill' for learning a language; it was done intentionally so that the participants

can focus on the weight of each of the statements. The interview questions were also put forward through an informal conversation. But the overall study of the statements suggests that statements 1, 2, 6, 7, 8 & 11 are about the overall situation about the English language proficiency whereas statements 9, 17, 18, 19 & 20 are concerned with the 'Reading Skills'; statements 3, 5, 9, 17, 22, 23 & 24 try to know about the 'Listening Skills'; statements 2, 4, 5, 9. 10, 13, 15, 16 & 24 are about the 'Speaking Skills'; and statements 2, 4, 12, 13, 14 & 21 are connected to the 'Writing Skills'. In case of general perception, the data show that 63.7% of the participants are of positive opinion (e.g. they simply agreed or strongly agreed to the statements); which, from the third person perspective, is not satisfactory at all. In fact, the researcher expected, at least, 80% to be the lowest tolerable margin. But, more alarmingly, when skill-wise (e.g. Reading, Listening, Speaking, Writing) data are analysed the scenario becomes more disastrous. The statements regarding 'Writing Skills' show only 60.8% participants opined in the positive; 'Listening Skills' show 56.1% participants opined in the positive; 'Reading Skills' show 53% opined in the positive and only 52.9% participants opined in the positive for 'Spoken Skills'. As of the teachers, everyone agrees that in none of the skills they find a good number of competent students, rather, more emphasis should be given solely on learning this language. 57% of them opined that students' main weakness is the writing skill, and 35% thought that speaking in English is the main problem. Reading skill and listening skill are the least problematic area according to the teachers, more specifically, 64% opined that students can manage to listen and understand the lectures delivered in English.

This statistics show that in none of the skills the participants are confident enough in themselves; rather lower percentage in each of the skills suggests that the proficiency level in English among the private university freshmen is not at a satisfactory level and it is one of the most important things for the learners that that should be addressed immediately. So, in general, it is clear that the level of proficiency of English language among the private university freshmen is not satisfactory. However, students are aware of the fact that without a sound knowledge of English language- competing in the job market, which is becoming narrower over time, will be very difficult. Even, the overall data analysis shows that the participants know that they are not yet up to the standard level. During the interview period, it became clear to the researcher that there are quite a few areas of English language, for example, grammar, story writing, developing paragraph and essay, speaking practice, reading various short stories and so on; in spite of covering them in the secondary and higher secondary levels, other aspects of the language, for example, speaking, listening, creative writing are not necessarily meeting the demands of the learners. These gaps along with the other findings are taken into consideration before placing the recommendations.

8. Limitations of the study

This research is based on questionnaire, academic results and interviews; it does not verify the authenticity of the opinions of students and teachers. The interviews were more like informal (semi structured) and not specific; basically their opinions were sought on the statements of the questionnaire. Academic results of the students could not be gathered due to confidentiality.

9. Recommendations

Drawing a general recommendation based on the finding of the study, where some limitations are clearly visible, is not an easy task for the researcher; however relevant suggestions or recommendations may support the cause to some extent. It is noticed that students (true for the lion's share of the students) work and study for getting good marks in the examinations. Teachers can allocate marks (can be a small fraction from the class test and assignments) for good performance of English Though in the department of English, students have to deal with a kind of English environment throughout their university life, but for the non-English departments, number of English language courses should be increased. In the last year of their university life or in the last two or three semesters there should be some advanced English language courses for the students so that when they complete their graduation, they can face the viva voce in the recruitment test boldly. Some basic courses can be divided into two parts, because students

complained about having less time to deal with the language. Courses for improving specific skills can be introduced. There can be, at least, two non-credit courses as well where the students will have to pass the test before moving on to the next courses. Different clubs along with the language labs can be setup dedicated to improving the proficiency of the language of the students. Audio visual effect works better for enjoyment or understanding of any given topic. Though power point slides are used in almost all the universities, but more audio and video should be used in the classroom so that the learners pay attention to the language they are listening. For example, movies or interviews on subject related topics can be shown in the classrooms. The researcher found out that most of the universities are working on newly designed Outcome Based Education (OBE) which is designed for realistic career purposes. This is high time the universities included courses and systems in the OBC (Outcome Based Curriculum) considering the level of proficiency of English of the students. Overall, the ministry of Education must evaluate the SSC and HSC curriculum and make dramatic changes (if needed) so that the present scenario changes quickly.

10. Conclusion

This study is not an attempt to evaluate the present scenario of the proficiency of English language among the private university students; rather it explores loopholes in the system and identify where improvements can be brought out, because the title of this paper requires special attention from the private university authority and the government as well. The shortcomings found in the study are not impossible to overcome, but they demand progressive effort from the people that work as policy makers. More extensive research and attention are required. Many students are going abroad for higher studies; and so, it is important that they are prepared to face the outer world by their respective universities; for which English language proficiency is a must.

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