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Research Paper

Abject Performance of Learning English Language at the Elementary Level in Bangladesh

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Abstract

English has been practised as an international language as well as the key for information access round the globe. Besides, a lot of important points has made English language very much essential to be learned. Having the ability in English also helps the students to study in wider-scale by skipping language barrier. Elementary school is the best stage to learn English as second language for non-native English language countries. In the existing situation, teaching and learning of English at the elementary level in Bangladesh has a very low standard where most of the students face difficulties to communicate in English and even competency level of most English teachers is not up to the mark (Sultana, 2010). With few major objectives, this study explores the present status, challenges of English learning at the elementary level in Bangladesh. Both the primary and secondary data has been collected and analyzed. 26 teachers had responded to the survey from four different schools in Dhaka. This paper has attempted to represent the overall situation about abject performance of learning English language at the elementary level in Bangladesh.

Keywords

Education in Bangladesh, elementary level, English teacher, communicative approach

1. Introduction

English, an international language has an important role in business, cross-border communication, education or information technology. There are lot of points that has made English very important to be learned. Having the ability in English opened up the door for rest in the world whereas a single language skill as such mother tongue keeps limited in its own territory. However, elementary school is the best stage to learn English as second language for non-native English language countries. Research has already shown that teaching and learning

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of English at the elementary level in Bangladesh has a very low standard. Most of the students face difficulties to communicate in English and even competency level of most of the English teachers is not up to the mark too. The primary level students in Bangladesh are required to memorize irrelevant details such as definitions of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc. Accuracy is prioritized rather than confidence building, fluency and general communicative competencies. Therefore, it is very essential to match existing teaching methodologies with communicative approach of English language teaching (Sultana, 2010).

English was introduced as a compulsory subject at the first grade in 1991 and earlier it was from grade six since 1974 in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the previous methodology of English teaching (developing linguistic competence through grammar-translation method) was replaced by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in 1996. In between, national education policies were reviewed several times and finally English subject got the maximum space in the national curriculum in 2000. Then English language has been recognized as an essential tool to build a knowledge-based society (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014 and Rahman & Pandian, 2018). However, there are some crucial factors/ constraints found in students' underachievement in English learning process in Bangladesh. For example, overcrowded classrooms, overload/overwork of teachers, lack of trained teachers in Communicative Language Teaching, inadequate teaching-learning materials, overloaded curricula, school environment, attitude and behavior of parents and school management, teachers spending noisy office hour, time factor/short class time, the quality of teaching- learning process, most of the teachers are bound to teach other subjects beside English and so on.

Elementary education is the main base of students which helps them to be confident in this competitive world. Realizing the demand of English in the global age, the current English national curriculum and syllabuses were revised in 1996 in Bangladesh and focused on the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. But since the introduction of this approach of teaching, teachers have been facing serious problems. The majority of teachers cannot teach the existing communicative textbooks properly in accordance with CLT approach, because they do not have adequate proficiency in English in required level.

2. Objective

The objective of the study is to find out the abject performance of learning English language at elementary level in Bangladesh. Few other objectives are-

a. To explore the present status of English learning at the elementary level in Bangladesh
b. To identify the major issues and challenges of English learning process especially in communicative approach at the primary level in Bangladesh
c. To open-up the reasons for poor performance of students in learning English at primary stage in Bangladesh
d. To find out the teacher qualification and attention regarding English subject
e. To look at the limitations in govt. support, education policy or text books, if there.

3. Literature Review

English language skills are crucial as well as important in the context of the global market place, the knowledge of society and in the age of digital information technology. Earlier researchers mostly focused on history, origin and importance of English language. Afriana (2017) stated that since English becomes an international language, most of the country in the world takes English as a compulsory subject in education curriculum.

The researcher also mentioned that English has several advantages when it has been taught since in an elementary school. The first advantage is an elementary school age is a brilliant time to

learn a second language. The second advantage is preparation to face English in a junior high school. The third advantage is the preparation to face the challenge of globalization and improve the quality in life.

Students weak in English are found in most of the countries where English is not spoken as the mother tongue. Hashemi (2011) identified that students' weakness in English language learning is due to the differences of social contexts, cultural environment. According to John & Ehow (2011), the problems of learning English language derived from many different factors in different environments such as school resources, class size, quality of teachers, and the school attendance of learners. Murray & Christison (2010) observed that many students think English is only a school subject and they do not see its significance for their prospective employment to work with multinational or national companies where English is employed. Hutchinson & Waters (1991) and Susanna (2007), pointed out that the mismatch between the students' conceptual or cognitive capacities and teachers' English proficiency level often cause problems for students because the students' learning style and teachers' teaching approach do not match and also the English course does not relate to the students' needs and interests.

Other researchers also focus on different issues, as such- teacher, method and curriculum. Brown (2000) focuses on the role of teacher and discuss about the conditions for learning. Blum (1984) pointed out 12 important characteristics of effective teaching.

Deborah (1999) stated that the students who are in the elementary ages between 7 up to 12 years are in the phase of entering a transitional period from the rapid growth of early childhood to the phase of more gradual development. Their abilities gradually develop the social, physical, and mental development. The researcher identified that young language learners can produce better results than older learners. The objective of English instruction in the primary school is to develop basic receptive skills in oral and written English (Huda, 1999). Here the present study attempts to explore the present status of English teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh. It also tries to identify the major challenges and issues of English language teaching at the primary level to overcome the mis-match of existing English language teaching methodologies and the communicative English language teaching approach mentioned in the national curriculum.

4. Methodology

In order to collect data about academic qualifications, professional training and problems of teaching English, English teachers from selected schools were provided a comprehensive questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: the first part contained the teachers' personal information including name, age, sex etc., the second part carried out their academic qualifications, professional training and experiences of teachers and the third part focused on the problems and needs of English teachers and the necessary information about English teaching and learning process. The collected data has been presented in tables with analysis and interpretation. The study has been done after carefully investigation in four schools at Dhaka city, selected randomly. This researcher has conducted the study by surveying on 26 teachers and observing more than 500 students at those schools, physically visiting few classrooms while conducting the class session which supported as primary data. Besides, previous research reports, magazines, newspaper column and news, books, published and unpublished thesis papers were the secondary source for the research at all.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. English Language at Primary Stage

A right to education has been recognized by most of the states and the United Nations too. In most regions, education is compulsory up to a certain age/stage. However, in Bangladesh, the

primary stage or the basic education level is very poor in nature. Government and Non-Government cooperation is highly accompanied but feedback is still under question marks. English in primary stage is most important as it is like the backbone for higher studies. Medical, engineering, science and IT education are in English language all around the world. However, all concern parties (E.g. teacher, teaching methods, school environment, parents support etc.) collaboration are playing vital role to develop English capabilities of the children at early age of schooling.

Most of the teachers have made some common comments about English. They remarked that English is different and difficult than other subjects except mathematics. Teachers should teach/speak in English language in English class and the students should learn English more than other subject at home. Parents may talk to their children in English language everyday basis for a fixed time period. Survey finds that-

Table 1: Teachers perception about English learning for primary level students

SL	Particulars	Level of Appreciation				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Students think- English is the most difficult subject	1	5	2	23	7
2	Is it needed to use English in Home to learn/get it?	2	1	12	13	10
3	There is a lack of English teacher in Bangladesh	1	7	3	17	10
4	There is a lot of ignorance of teachers about student's English learning process	2	3	4	23	6
5	There is also ignorance of guardians about their children's English learning process	1	4	2	26	5
6	Guardians also liable for student's poor performance in English subjects at Primary Schooling	1	8	1	25	3
7	There is also lack of student's friendly English write-ups at Primary School stage at Bangladesh	1	7	4	17	9
8	It would be helpful to make students fearless about English learning by using multimedia or postal presentation at Primary School stage at Bangladesh	2	2	2	20	12
9	Family background in respect to education rate, positively affect to the students' motivation about English learning	2	4	3	21	8
10	Students interest about learning English is really poor	2	19	5	9	3

N.B.: 1-Strongly disagree 2- Disagree 3- Either agree or disagree 4-Agree 5- Strongly Agree

Source: Primary Data, Collected on May 2019

5.2. Importance of Learning English at Elementary School

English has several advantages when it is taught since in the elementary school. Three of which are elementary school-age is a brilliant time to learn a second language, preparation English in the junior high school, and preparation to face the globalization era. However, 6-13 years of age is the right age to learn a second language beside the mother language because at that age children have a good brain condition to receive something new. According to brain imaging technological research conducted in California, Los Angeles, children aged 6-13 years old who are commonly known as in critical periods, states that areas of the brain that organize a language skill has the most rapid growth. Giving them a second language needs some stages along with their ability.

Table 2: Major Student Activities for Learning English at Elementary School

Level	Concentration	Activities
Grade 1	Idea about vocabulary	With pictures
Grade 2	Idea about Sentence	Singing song together
Grade 3	Creative thinking	Puzzle game to think word
Grade 4	Read and write	Help to pronounce
Grade 5	Idea about sentence making	Support to make sentence
Grade 6	Speaking skills	Ask to explain about a topic

Learning English since elementary school has many good effects for students' future career challenges. With the competition to get a better life or career in this world is not easy without having special ability in English skills. In brief, English as an international language is important for human's life because it becomes a bridge between countries to interact (Sultana, 2010). Nonetheless, in this fast-moving globalization era, English has become a crucial tool for continuing education, employment and social status.

5.3. English Learning Environment at Elementary Schooling in Bangladesh

The basic learning platform such as classrooms, teacher quality, teacher motivation and overall learning friendly environment are really very poor facilitated in most of the schools located both in rural and urban parts of Bangladesh. Classroom practices emphasize rote learning rather than understanding and use of English in real life situations. A teacher in both government and registered non-government schools has to take 7-8 classes every day. For effective English language teaching at the primary level, the subject knowledge of English teachers is very important. English teachers need to have a level of English language skills and sufficient understanding of key concepts of English language in order to make curricular coherence. Especially the general aim of English language teaching is to enable students to speak, read and write English fluently. To achieve this goal, the English teachers have to create opportunities for students to use English in meaningful, realistic, relevant situations. In Bangladesh, 100% of English teachers in rural and urban area take other classes including English. In some schools, there is no particular English teachers too. For making English language teaching more effective, there should be particular English teacher in every school.

Sultana (2010) found that the teachers followed three types of teaching methods, e.g. Communicative, Lecture and Question-Answer methods. It is found that in rural area 84% teachers follow lecture method, 16% teachers follow Question- Answer method and none of them follow communicative method. But in urban area 32% follow communicative method, 56% follow lecture method and 12% follow question-answer method. That means, it is found that most of the English teachers both in the rural (84%) and urban (56%) areas follow lecture method in their teaching learning process. The English teachers (64% in rural and 52% in urban area) have to take up to 7 classes every day. If an English teacher is burdened with 6/7 classes in a day, it is a fact that effective English language teaching is quite impossible with him/her. Again, in Bangladesh, the usual class-sizes exceed 'seventy-five' or even hundred. Therefore, when a teacher attempts to divide such a large class into groups, it ultimately gives rise to managerial difficulties. Eventually, the teacher would face complications in monitoring the pair or group activities ensuring the importance of meaningful, purposeful language and communication, which in turn must allow the student to give vent to creative possibilities. To circulate among the groups, listen to students, and offer suggestions and criticisms would demand more time and effort than a teacher can usually afford (Brown, 2000).

The main goal of the national curriculum is: to focus on the four skills of language – listening, speaking, reading and writing as learner centered activities within communicative context. But in reality, only the skills of reading, writing and grammar are usually covered in classroom

teaching. This is because listening and speaking are not assessed in examinations and so teachers and students do not worry about these two essential skills of communicative English. 25% students are weak in listening and 55% are weak in speaking skills. The English teachers should take necessary initiatives to overcome this situation. Similarly, it is essential to give clear direction in the national curriculum to evaluate both listening and speaking skills both for all examinations.

For effective teaching in communicative approach, it is very essential to practice four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Nevertheless, creating sufficient interaction in classrooms, the CLT method requires interactive classroom activities with the integration of those four language skills. Previous studies strongly recommended providing training to the English teachers, and more communicative and participatory classroom facilities for implementing communicative English language teaching methodology and assessment system. First and last, involvement of all parties such as teachers, students, parents, school management are very much required for English language learning and teaching performance development.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study suggests the following recommendations:

a) A teacher should not take more than 3-4 classes every day.
b) Considering the number of primary schools (Government and non-government) is about 309,000, total number of students 16.4 million: age 6 to 10 (DPE, 2009) is very high. That means abnormal teacher-student ratio which should be reduced.
c) Teacher-students ratio should be reduced in English classroom too, as such 1:40.
d) Government and Non-government organizations jointly can take initiatives to increase the number of the primary school teachers training courses.
e) In every school, the English teachers should be selected on the basis of their academic/subject background. The academic qualifications of the majority of the primary teachers are Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). They pass these certificate examinations despite getting the bare minimum pass marks in English. As a result, they come to teach English with little or no English language proficiency of their own (Hoque, 2006).
f) Strong English proficiency test must be included in teacher recruitment process.
g) Govt agencies can provide appropriate teaching aids in addition to the textbooks for all primary schools to develop the students' four basic language skills (NCTB,1996).
h) Teachers can incorporate a variety of activities for speaking and listening skills in his/her lesson plan which will ensure maximum students' involvement in the classroom activities.

7. Conclusion

The current approach of English language teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh prescribed in the curriculum is the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT method needs interactive classroom activities with the integration of four language skills reading, writing, listening and speaking (Sarwar, 2007). But in reality, English teachers at the primary level in Bangladesh face various types of constraints in increasing the interaction and integration of the four skills in English language teaching classrooms. Therefore, all the concern parties i.e. students, school authorities, parents, etc. have to be careful and supportive and especially the English teachers should be more dynamically equipped with professional sensibility and the in-depth teaching knowledge to overcome this abject situation as well as to make a swift, realistic

and novel steps to ensure effective English language teaching/learning environment at the elementary schooling level in Bangladesh.

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