

English as a Foreign Language: Insights from a Public University in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to examine the perspective of learners from a public university regarding English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabus and pedagogy. The learners in this study are studying Masters (MA) in ELT at Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University (MBSTU). MBSTU is a public university situated in Tangail, Bangladesh. Being their direct teacher, I thought it would be interesting to find out how my students are perceiving ELT courses, in fact the process of data collection and analysis has been an important learning experience for myself, allowing me to delve into the loopholes and strengths of the current ELT curriculum. The survey questionnaire was sent to thirty of the currently enrolled MA students but fourteen responses were obtained due to the current Corona virus pandemic situation. It is worthwhile to mention that this is the first cohort of students for the MA in ELT program at MBSTU. The MA in ELT program was introduced in the university in 2019. This study was conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire, and data was analyzed qualitatively. The findings from the study suggest that the students prioritize speaking English fluently and pronouncing English vocabulary correctly. The MA syllabus was highly commended by students as it focuses on pronunciation through the course of Phonetics and Phonology.

1. Introduction

The students studying at public universities in Bangladesh usually complete their primary and secondary school education at their own villages and suburban towns, the curriculum and teaching quality at these villages and towns is best described as inadequate. The best education is usually provided in the schools and universities of Dhaka (the capital and largest city of Bangladesh), this can be attributed to the problem of centralization. Almost everything from the best education to healthcare is available only in Dhaka. Therefore, the students studying at villages and towns unfortunately do not get the best facilities. Therefore, at university level these students face a number of problems as the syllabus encompasses books and materials in English.

I cannot agree more with Steinberg that it is indeed difficult for an adult to grasp a second language compared to a 4- or 5-year-old child as at this age children will learn the basic vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation of their language with great ease (Steinberg, 1993, p.3). This acquisition of English as a second language for the students who have come from rural background become way more challenging as they are minimally exposed and immersed in the target language. This crisis deepens when they get admitted in the universities and find that they do not have fundamental competence in communication let alone competence in critical thinking through English language. I feel this is a common problem that English learners face when they are studying at public universities in Bangladesh. This paper will examine the perspective and perception of English learners at Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University.

2. Literature Review

Most studies dealing with ELT have focused on the impacts of projects. For example, Hamid and Baldauf examined the outcome of the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), according to them the impact of the project did not meet expectations (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). While Ali and Walker as well as Shrestha have examined the impacts of English in Action (EIA) project, Shrestha's study dealt with Bangladeshi school children's perceptions and pointed out the limitations of EIA (Shrestha, 2013). While Shrestha points out that EIA needs to consider the local context and the views of learners (Shrestha, 2013), Ali and

Walker argue that for the success of EIA, an appropriate ELT policy is needed as part of the national ELT curriculum (Ali & Walker, 2014). This paper will not examine the impact of any project, and will limit itself to the perceptions of ELT students at university level towards the university syllabus.

While studies have dealt with English Language learning complexities at secondary level (Hossain, 2018), Madrasas (Golam and Kusakabi, 2018) and primary level (Shrestha, 2013) the perceptions of a new cohort of MA students studying ELT at a public university has not been studied, this paper aims to put forward the perceptions of public university students studying ELT.

This study will see Bangladesh as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context rather than an ESL (English as a Second Language) context, as I agree with Ali and Walker that Bangladesh seems to fit more within the EFL context (Ali & Walker) as the reality in Bangladesh is that English is confined to classrooms.

3. Methodology

A semi-structured questionnaire (see annex) was prepared to collect data from my MA students enrolled in the ELT programme. The questionnaire was prepared based on the research questions (a deductive approach). The questionnaire was sent to them via email with instructions, I repeatedly contacted the class representative to ensure that all of my students received the questionnaire and told them to call me in case they faced difficulties in understanding questions. All of the MA students received the questionnaire and responses were obtained from fourteen students, the others cited technical difficulties and the unavailability of devices. The data collection was not done in person as all educational institutions are closed in Bangladesh and online classes are ongoing due to current pandemic situation i.e. to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The data collected using the questionnaire based on research questions was organized for thematic analysis. Recurrent themes were extracted from the student responses. Two stages of analysis were undertaken, at the first stage the key themes were found and during the second stage these themes were refined.

Research questions (deductive approach) as well as student insights (inductive approach) were utilized in this study.

4. Results and Discussion

The respondents mainly emphasized on the teaching method and the challenges, the challenges stated were mostly related to teaching method and English pronunciation. Some of the respondents also highlighted the challenges faced by them during the current pandemic, students outlined the pandemic challenge by describing how the teaching method has changed to a virtual setting and suggesting how the virtual teaching method can be improved. The broad themes as well as the sub categories have been discussed below.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

An interesting finding under the broad theme CLT which is worth highlighting is that while most of the respondents found this method to be effective some found this method challenging. CLT was introduced in Bangladesh in 1997 in secondary and higher secondary level. Curriculum and textbooks were also designed in alignment to this CLT implementation in the education policy of Bangladesh. But due to lack of proper teacher training and other resources the objectives of CLT are yet to be achieved.

Respondents in favor of this method elaborated how this method allows learners to try out and experiment with what they know, according to these respondents this method provides opportunity to develop both accuracy and fluency and it also enables them to link skills such as speaking, reading and listening together. Respondents also claimed that the method is flexible as mistakes are not counted as wrong, learners feel free to use the language without thinking about the grammatical mistake because communicative competence is given most importance.

Respondents who found this method challenging put forward that the method is not effective due to the intricacies and difficulties that lie within the language itself, these respondents stated that words are spelt in one way but are pronounced in another way in English which makes them feel conscious. All the respondents however stipulated that the syllabus addressed the challenges that they faced.

Participatory Teaching Methods

Almost all the respondents were in favor of participatory teaching method, they deemed this approach as reflective and outlined that the method stresses the subjectivity of learners and the self-construction of knowledge. The respondents also stated that the method involved high degree of activity and personal involvement of participants in the learning process.

Phonetics and Phonology

Most respondents put forward that the course Phonetics and Phonology was the strong point of the syllabus. According to the respondents this course is both interesting and helpful as it studies physical properties of speech, the course looks at the interaction of different vocal organs which helps them to pronounce correctly. Students put forward that this course enabled them to pronounce correctly and enhanced their self-esteem as well as confidence.

The second popular course among the respondents is Linguistics as it studies the basic facets of the nature of English language and introduces them to the fundamental aspects of structure and function of language.

Virtual Teaching Platform

Respondents put forward that their classes are held virtually due to the pandemic, and placed their concern regarding the virtual mode of teaching. They stated that they preferred if teachers keep their video on while using respective virtual platforms as it helps them to follow eye movement and body language of teachers and this encourages them to respond. The respondents were against the teachers only using audio mode for teaching, they stated that when teachers only use audio they do not understand when the teachers want them to respond or interact.

5. Conclusion

The findings from the study suggest that the demand for ELT from the side of students is driven by the desire to speak English fluently and pronounce English vocabulary correctly. Most of them think fluency and correctness of pronunciation have a significant importance in increasing the possibility of getting related jobs. Besides, some of them have also expressed that the capacity of pronouncing English vocabulary correctly boosts their self-esteem and self-image. Almost all of the students who were enrolled in MA program have completed their undergrad either from National University or underrated private universities. They think their undergrad courses did not help them much to develop their skills in phonetics and phonology. The students prioritize communication skills with special focus on pronunciation rather than the specialized courses that the MA program offers. This is an area of concern; the students described the adequacy of the MA syllabus quite narrowly in terms of communication skills specially pronunciation skills which raises doubt about their understanding of the diverse theories that the MA program delves into and the development of their critical and intellectual capacities.

The MA syllabus was highly commended by students as it focuses on pronunciation through the course of Phonetics and Phonology. Although the syllabus was highly commended by students, the students indicated that there is scope of improvement in teaching method. Students highlighted that they wanted the teaching method to be participatory and interactive. It is worth mentioning that, the learners have developed their perceptions about the teaching methods mostly based on their experiences of the classes conducted online during Corona virus pandemic time. They suggested that the teaching-learning practices in online platforms like ZOOM should have been made more interactive and participatory from the side of the teachers for the sake of developing the communication skills of the target learners of ELT courses.

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Annex**Semi-structured questionnaire**

Instructions: Please read the questions carefully and answer, some questions require elaborate answers please elaborate accordingly. Please be honest while answering (the responses will only be used for research purposes and your identity will remain anonymous so write whatever you feel honestly, also there is no right and wrong answer). Write your answers under the answers section, please number the answers so that they match the question number (for example if you are answering question 1 then the answer number will be 1). There is no word limit for the answers the answers can be as long as you want but please be sure to include your honest opinions in the answers.

Questions:

1. Do you think that the MA in ELT syllabus is adequate? Please explain why or why not?
2. Which ELT course do you enjoy most and why?
3. Which teaching method do you think is most effective and why?
4. What are the challenges that you face while speaking, writing and reading in English? Do you think that the MA in ELT program is helping you to address these challenges?
5. Why did you choose to do MA in ELT and what are your expectations from this MA program?