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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Obstacles in Instructing English at Village Elementary Schools in Bangladesh: A Study and Proposals

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**ABSTRACT**

Elementary education serves as the foundation for students' future endeavors. Each year, many students in rural Bangladesh fail public examinations, and those who pass often do so by rote memorization, lacking proficiency in the four key language skills required for competence in English. Primary education was chosen for this study as it is a crucial stage where teachers bear full responsibility for student learning. The primary objective of this research was to identify the obstacles in teaching and learning English at the elementary level in rural areas of Bangladesh. Data were gathered using two sets of questionnaires administered to both students and teachers to assess the state of English language education in these primary schools. Additionally, teacher interviews and classroom observations, guided by an observation checklist, were conducted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current teaching practices. The findings reveal that the majority of rural students struggle with English due to several factors, including a shortage of skilled and trained teachers, inadequate teacher training, inappropriate teaching methods and materials, limited contact hours, large class sizes, and insufficient pedagogical knowledge. This paper also includes several recommendations based on the research findings to address these challenges effectively.

**KEYWORDS**

Elementary education; Rural Bangladesh; English language skills; Teaching obstacles; Inadequate teacher training

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### 1. Introduction

English textbooks at this level are designed to help learners develop four key language skills through engaging and enjoyable activities. The National Education Policy of 2010 revised the primary curriculum to emphasize learning English as an international language for local and global communication. The goal is to build a foundation in listening and speaking skills, which supports the development of reading and writing skills.

The main purpose of language is to communicate needs, feelings, thoughts, and ideas (Banu, 2009). Studies show that many primary school graduates struggle to effectively use language skills (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Ahmed & Nath, 2005). To improve language learning, comprehension strategies should be explicitly taught, and students' interpretations of texts should be valued in the classroom (Nath and Hossain, 2005). Children need to learn different reading strategies, such as scanning, skimming, and locating information in texts.

Effective learning experiences require opportunities for reflection, application, and consolidation (Shukla, 2008). In English language teaching (ELT), experts like Littlewood (1981), Richards and Rodgers (1986), Tudor (1993), and Harmer (2001) have suggested various roles for language teachers. Teachers can act as facilitators of learning, classroom managers, consultants, advisors, and sometimes co-communicators with learners. The goal of these roles is to help students progress in their language learning.

Interactive communication and collaborative learning help students develop their language and thinking skills. English, as a global language, is crucial for students to compete in an increasingly globalized world. There are three contexts for English: English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

In Bangladesh, the primary objective of teaching English is to enable students to understand and respond to simple commands, requests, and instructions in English. Students should be able to speak, read, and write simple English appropriate for their age and level. However, the English curriculum is not always implemented effectively, especially in rural areas, which hinders students from achieving primary English language competencies.

### **1.1 Current Status of English Language in Bangladesh:**

The necessity of teaching English in the South Asian subcontinent was first addressed in Lord Macaulay's Minute of 1835 (Krishnaswamy and Sriraman, 1995). Macaulay emphasized the importance of educating the natives through English, with two main objectives. The first was to create a class of natives who, despite their heritage, would adopt English culture and act as intermediaries between the rulers and the subjects. The second was to foster a demand for European institutions. Both objectives were designed to serve the interests of the British rulers, not the native population. Upon its publication, Macaulay remarked that it would be "the proudest day in English history" (Sadek, 2002).

During the Pakistan period, English was a second language in Bangladesh due to British colonial influence. Educated individuals were required to use English in offices, education, and other professional settings. However, after the war of liberation in 1971, English's official status changed to that of a foreign language in independent Bangladesh. Recently, English has regained significant unofficial importance.

Bangladesh has around 90,000 primary schools with approximately 17 million students. The teacher population is 264,177, resulting in a teacher-student ratio of 1:56, the highest among all educational levels (Raju, 2003). English is used alongside Bangla in many government, semi-government, and private organizations. Each educational level has a curriculum, which includes a set of teaching materials. The English curriculum at the primary level outlines the aims, teaching methods, techniques, teaching aids, and evaluation systems.

To make English study effective from primary to tertiary levels, several resources are required, such as trained teachers, communicative teaching materials, and financial, infrastructural, and management support. However, these resources are often lacking in rural primary schools, leading to poor teaching and learning conditions. In rural areas, learning often means memorizing grammatical rules and textbook content without understanding. There is a noticeable disparity between urban and rural students in learning English. Urban students have better access to cable television, cyber cafes, and English newspapers, providing them more opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In some urban schools, computer education is mandatory from an early age, helping students learn and use English words and vocabulary. Consequently, urban students tend to have higher proficiency levels in English, which is evident in public examinations and interviews.

### **2. Research objectives:**

The main goal of this study was to understand the challenges of using the English curriculum in primary schools in rural Bangladesh. The specific objectives were:

1. To find out how English is currently being taught and learned in primary rural schools in Bangladesh.
2. To identify the challenges of applying the English curriculum in these schools.
3. To provide recommendations to overcome the challenges of implementing the English curriculum in rural primary schools in Bangladesh.

### 3. Methodology

The study aimed to investigate the current state of English teaching and learning processes in rural areas of Bangladesh and to identify the challenges in implementing the English curriculum. A mixed-methods approach was employed. Two sets of questionnaires (for teachers and students) and a structured observation checklist were used for the quantitative approach, while interviews were conducted for the qualitative approach.

The research was conducted in the rural area of Jaldhaka Upazila, under Nilphamari district, Bangladesh, which has 63 primary schools. Out of these schools, 20 schools were selected randomly for data collection. Only students from classes III, IV, and V were included, as English is not formally taught in classes I and II. In total, 20 teachers (one from each selected school) and 400 students (20 from each school) were chosen for questionnaires. The student and teacher questionnaire consisted mainly of close-ended questions

10 English teachers' classes were observed. Additionally, 10 English teachers, whose classes were not observed, were interviewed to gain in-depth insights. The observation checklist was used to evaluate classroom teaching and learning conditions and procedures for English language learning. The interviews with teachers focused on understanding their views on the challenges of teaching the English curriculum in rural primary schools.

### 4. Results and Discussions

The section is concerned with the presentation of results and discussions of the study.

#### 4.1 Results from Students' Questionnaire:

As shown in Table 1, among all respondents, 55% reported that they read English regularly, while 45% said they did not. 5% of students responded that they had ways of capturing lessons. 8% students stated that they did speaking exercise in the classrooms. 10% of the students reported that they did writing exercises in the classrooms. On the other hand, 18% of the students reported that they did read in the classes. According the findings, no students did listening practices in the classrooms.

**Table 1: Students' Statements**

| Statements                                      | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| Studying English regularly in the classroom     | 55%        |
| Ways of capturing lesson                        | 5%         |
| Speaking exercise in the classroom              | 8%         |
| Writing exercise in the classroom               | 10%        |
| Reading exercise in the classroom               | 18%        |
| Listening exercise in the classroom             | 0%         |
| Understanding learning methods on their own     | 5%         |
| Learning lessons in teachers' classes           | 5%         |
| Relying on guidebooks                           | 40%        |
| Learning from private tutors                    | 50%        |
| Conducting speaking exercises in the classrooms | 8%         |

In terms of learning methods, 5% understand lessons on their own, 5% of students learn in teacher's classes, 40% rely on guidebooks, and a number of students (50%) learn from private tutors. Regarding speaking exercises, only 8% of respondents said that English teachers always conduct these exercises in the classroom.

**4.2 Results from Teachers’ Questionnaire:**

As shown in Table 2, additionally, 18% of teachers were aware of the aims and objectives of primary education, whereas 82% were not aware, at all.. Regarding professional development, 55% of teachers participated in training, while 45% did not participate in any trainings. When it comes to teaching English, only 22% received training, while most of the teachers did not receive any training. Furthermore, 32% of teachers prepared lesson plans before teaching, whereas 68% did not. In terms of language use, 60% of teachers conducted their lessons in Bangla, 6% used English, and 34% used both Bangla and English. Regarding the use of teaching aids for English instruction, 6% of teachers always used them, 42% often used them, and 52% never used them.

**Table 2: Teachers’ Statements**

| Statements  | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| Knowledge anout the aims,objectives of English                  | 18%        |
| Training participation for professional skill development       | 55%        |
| Training tobteach English                                       | 22%        |
| Lesson plan preparation   | 32%        |
| Using language in English class                                 | 6%         |
| Use of teaching aid and instrumental materials to teach English | 6%         |

**4.2 Results from structured Classroom Observation:**

From classroom observations (structured) as shown in Table 3, it was found that 2% of teachers were excellent in classroom management, 10% of teachers were good, 38% were average, 40% were found as below average, and 10% of them were found as entirely ineffective. In terms of student motivation and engagement, 32% of teachers were found to be average, 60% were below average, and 8% of the teachers had no intention of motivating their students. Regarding teaching methodology, 5% of students were found to be good, 10% were average, and the vast majority (85%) were below average, indicating significant inactivity and poor learning outcomes. Regarding classroom learning, Only 28% of teachers were average while 72% were found to be below average. had a good depth of subject knowledge, 20% have an average understanding, and 66% are below average, particularly in English, affecting their teaching effectiveness.

**Table 3: Classroom Observation Checklist**

| Statement                           | Scale | Excellent | Good | Average | Below | Unable |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-----------|------|---------|-------|--------|
| Classroom management                |       | 2%        | 10%  | 38%     | 40%   | 10%    |
| Students' engagement and motivation |       | -         | -    | 32%     | 60%   | 8%     |
| Teaching methodology                |       | -         | 5%   | 10%     | 85%   | -      |
| Classroom learning                  |       | -         | -    | 28%     | 72%   | -      |
| Time management                     |       | 5%        | 21%  | 34%     | 26%   | 16%    |
| Technique of evaluation             |       | 6%        | 23%  | 14%     | 27%   | 31%    |

|                         |  |    |     |     |     |     |
|-------------------------|--|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Ways of giving feedback |  | 2% | 18% | 27% | 22% | 32% |
|-------------------------|--|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|

About 28% of teachers were average in classroom learning environment, while 72% were below average. For time management, 5% of teachers were excellent, 21% were good, 34% were average, 26% were below average, and 16% did not maintain any schedule, impacting student learning. When it comes to evaluation techniques, 6% of teachers were excellent, 23% were good, 14% were average, 27% were below average, and 31% were completely unable to evaluate student learning. Finally, 2% of teachers had excellent feedback abilities, 18% were good, 27% were average, 22% were below average, and 32% lacked the skills or did not provide feedback.

#### 4.1 Results from Interview of Teachers:

Ten English teachers, whose classes were not observed were chosen for interviews to gather detailed insights into rural primary school education. The responses from these teachers were analyzed using a qualitative approach to provide in-depth information.

*Training related to the English subject:* The majority of teachers indicated that they had not undergone any specific subject-related training from the PTI, except for the compulsory one-year Certificate in Education (C-in-ED) training required for all primary school teachers.

*Classroom Management:* According to most teachers, they begin by taking attendance and instructing students to open their books. They then check homework assignments before starting their teaching sessions using textbooks to ensure students grasp the lessons. If any student has questions, they address them promptly. Afterward, homework is assigned before dismissing the class. One teacher out of ten adopts a different approach: he starts by motivating students, often sharing related stories, then carefully explains the English lesson and provides feedback.

*Teaching Resources:* Most teachers agree that they receive minimal support for additional teaching aids from the school, government, or non-governmental donor agencies, relying mainly on blackboards, chalk, and dusters. Given their average workload of eight classes, they express little inclination to use supplementary teaching materials.

*Contact Hours:* All teachers in the study confirm they are allocated 35 to 40 minutes per class, prompting them to aim to cover the syllabus within the academic year.

*Implementation of Curriculum Teaching-Learning Techniques:* All teachers indicate challenges in adhering to prescribed teaching-learning techniques due to large class sizes and challenging learning environments.

*Steps to Enhance Classroom Engagement:* Most teachers acknowledge they do not actively take steps to engage students in class, intervening only when there are disruptions. However, two teachers utilize group work, pair work, and questioning techniques to foster student participation, aiming for effective English language learning.

*Support for Weak and Special Needs Students:* While most teachers prioritize helping weaker and special needs students understand the material, two teachers go a step further by occasionally contacting parents to discuss their responsibilities towards their children or visiting students' homes to provide motivational support.

*Achieving Learning Objectives:* All teachers in the study admitted to lacking a clear understanding of learning objectives and the skills needed to assess whether these objectives are met.

*Challenges in Implementing the English Curriculum:* All teachers cited numerous challenges in implementing the English curriculum, including high student-teacher ratios, small classrooms, inadequate teaching aids, insufficient subject-specific training, lack of teacher guides, and deficiencies in physical facilities such as school buildings, classroom sizes, electricity supply, libraries, and hygienic toilets, all of which affect the learning environment.

*Suggestions to Overcome Implementation Challenges:* Teachers unanimously recommended that the government should address these issues by recruiting more teachers for primary schools to reduce student-teacher ratios, increasing contact hours, providing additional teaching aids and subject-specific training, and ensuring timely distribution of teacher guides. They also suggest that NGOs could play a role in alleviating these problems.

## **5. Summary of the Findings**

According to Sadek (2002), regular practice is essential for acquiring proficiency in a non-native language, particularly in English, as observed in this study where rural students find English daunting despite their efforts to read regularly. In Bangladesh, the majority of primary schools are situated in rural areas, lacking modern learning facilities. This deficiency directly impedes students' English proficiency and contributes to their struggles with the subject. The use of engaging teaching strategies is minimal among teachers, further complicating English comprehension for rural students and resulting in poor academic performance.

School authorities are perceived as indifferent to English language learning, failing to provide necessary teaching materials and focusing instead on personal financial gain. This neglect poses a significant challenge, hindering teachers from employing effective teaching methodologies and contributing to the overall low proficiency in English among rural students. Furthermore, most teachers lack essential training in English language instruction, which is crucial for their professional development. Even trained teachers seldom utilize their training due to lack of supervision, exacerbating the situation.

Despite the compulsory inclusion of English from the first grade, Primary Training Institutes (PTIs) do not offer adequate English Language Teaching (ELT) provisions, leaving teachers ill-prepared to teach the subject effectively. Consequently, teachers often resort to traditional lecture methods, lacking familiarity with modern instructional approaches. This gap in teaching methods contributes to English being perceived as a challenging and uninteresting subject for learners.

In this study, many teachers express frustration over the absence of a teachers' guide, essential for effective classroom instruction, despite some being aware of its existence. This lack prevents them from conducting English classes fruitfully.

The curriculum serves as the cornerstone of the education system, outlining educational goals, objectives, and learning outcomes. However, this research reveals that most teachers are unfamiliar with the curriculum, posing a significant obstacle to its implementation. This deficiency in curriculum knowledge may adversely affect learners' proficiency in English.

Lesson plans are crucial preparatory tools that aid in effective class management. Yet, this study finds that teachers, burdened with an average of eight classes per day, often struggle to create detailed lesson plans.

Teaching aids and instructional materials are vital for engaging students and facilitating the acquisition of English content knowledge. Unfortunately, the study indicates that teachers rely solely on chalk and dusters, neglecting additional teaching aids that could enhance student engagement.

A continuous assessment system and timely feedback are essential for assessing student progress, identifying weaknesses, and addressing them promptly. However, the research reveals that many teachers overlook these practices, which contributes to students falling behind in English proficiency.

The primary aim of teaching English at the primary level is to enable students to comprehend simple instructions and carry them out. However, this study reveals a lack of listening activities in classrooms, a critical skill in language learning essential for achieving accurate pronunciation and speaking proficiency (Sadek, 2002). Surprisingly, no schools are equipped with listening labs or instruments dedicated to improving English listening skills.

Furthermore, the research finds that most teachers seldom practice speaking in English during class, focusing instead on occasional reading and writing exercises. Despite attempts to incorporate these activities, the effectiveness of their teaching methods remains questionable due to insufficient knowledge of proper techniques. Alarming, many rural primary school teachers struggle to compose original texts and rarely engage with English TV programs, newspapers, or books. Their teaching priorities often prioritize exam performance over holistic language development.

Another significant concern is the shortage of qualified English teachers in schools, resulting in teachers from other subjects leading English classes without adequate expertise. This issue affects both government and non-government primary schools, highlighting the urgent need for targeted recruitment of English teachers. Addressing this shortfall could significantly enhance English language learning outcomes at the primary level in Bangladesh.

## **6. Recommendations**

1. There is a need to recruit more English teachers to meet the demand.
2. It is essential to extend the duration of each class.
3. Large classes should be subdivided into smaller sections with fewer than 30 students.
4. More training sessions on the Communicative Language Teaching approach should be organized for teachers.

5. Additional teaching aids, particularly audiovisual materials, should be provided in classrooms.
6. Urgent implementation of training under the PLTP program is necessary for teachers.
7. Emphasis should be placed on enhancing speaking and listening activities.
8. Exams should include assessments of speaking and listening skills.
9. Teachers must assess the mood of students, as their concentration and interest levels vary throughout the day. Mornings are optimal for intensive lessons, while lighter activities are advisable before breaks and at the end of the day.
10. Professional administration of student responses during lessons is crucial.
11. To encourage students to speak English, teachers should utilize the translation method, providing language charts with sentence construction rules for practical scenarios like classroom interactions, greetings, and requests. These charts should be prominently displayed for continuous practice and reference.
12. Remedial classes should be mandatory for weaker students, and their attendance should not affect their academic standing.
13. Teachers can foster student engagement by encouraging poetry recitations and organizing monthly poetry competitions along with other English language contests throughout the academic year.
14. Teachers should engage students by presenting intriguing problems for discussion and solution.

## 7. Conclusion

The Bangladesh Government has implemented several initiatives such as Compulsory Primary Education and Zila Prathamik Shiksha, to uplift rural communities. The National Education Policy-2010 was enacted to address the educational needs of learners. However, this study highlights significant challenges in teaching and learning English at the primary level in rural Bangladesh. It identifies teachers' insufficient pedagogical knowledge, high student-teacher ratios, large class sizes, limited contact hours, inadequate teacher training, shortage of qualified teachers, and lack of language learning tools as major obstacles.

To address these challenges, it is essential to recruit highly qualified subject specialists, provide comprehensive training for professional development, improve salary structures to enhance job satisfaction, supply sufficient teaching aids for language skill development, conduct extensive awareness programs, revise learning methods to make them more engaging and experimental, and upgrade school infrastructure.

The study encourages further research to compare the English language competencies of urban and rural students and propose solutions to enhance learning outcomes. Given the global significance of English, addressing these issues is crucial for educational advancement. Addressing these challenges will create a conducive teaching environment in rural primary schools across Bangladesh.

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