

English Language Education in Pre and Post COVID Bangladesh: A Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT

After the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, use of English language was restricted as Bangla got a dominant place in the new constitution due to a nationalistic fervor. Gradually the importance of learning English increased as people speaking English were in better positions than those speaking only Bangla. Gradually the National Education Policy (NEP)-2010 acknowledged the importance of English and recommended it as a compulsory subject in schools and colleges and as a medium of instruction (MOI) in higher studies. Things were going on in a linear fashion but the COVID pandemic in the early 2020 created an educational crisis. The educational paradigm shifted as fast as the lightning. This review article investigated the brief history of ELE in Bangladesh; excavated the policy reforms; explored the challenges faced by organizations, teachers and students due to the quick transition from offline classes to absolute virtual ones and their endeavours to get accustomed to the educational pedagogies in the post-vaccine era. It also shed light on the future ELE in Bangladesh envisioning an adoption of transformative pedagogy. It is expected to assist policy makers, researchers, teachers and students to understand the New-normal realities in order to frame a better Next-normal ELE system.

Keywords: English Language Education, Emergency Remote Teaching, Post-COVID Pedagogy, New and Next Normal Education, Transformative ELE Pedagogy

ELE as a Linguistic Imperialism in Bangladesh

The foundation stone of modern English language education in the Indian subcontinent was established during the British Raj (1757 -1947). Thomas Macaulay, supporting the Governor General Council's socio-political initiatives, wrote his notable minutes in 1835 to make "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, in intellect" (Macaulay, 1952, p. 729). Macaulay argued for funding British model of education in Western subjects, with English as the language of instruction. Thus, the colonisers wanted to make their linguistic implantation deep-rooted in our education system. Even after they had left in 1947, they became successful to materialize their agenda by shaping up British-model talents who played the major roles in designing curriculum, assessment and overall education policies. During the Pakistani regime (1947 - 1971), English was the MOI in educational sector in East Pakistan (Name of Bangladesh). Bangladesh got independence in 1971 and joined the Commonwealth in 1972 as its 34th member. Due to the aftermath of the Liberation War, the war-torn Bangladesh with a ravaged infrastructure couldn't bring in major reforms in education. Brilliant teachers and students with a view to changing their wheel of fortune accepted scholarship opportunities offered by England. Moreover, the British Council and the American Centre had big budgets for training the English language teachers of all levels and every year they provided funding back-up to host national and international conferences and training programmes where the keynote speakers and trainers were mostly from the native English speaking countries (UK and USA).

Pennycook (1998) rightly pointed out that as part of the expansionist mechanism, the colonial agenda regarding ELE was merely 'to produce clerks to run the colonial system' (p. 539). Possessing 'one golden egg – the English language' (Donaldson, 1984, p. 35), the international capitalists and funding organisations always played the role of missionaries to spread ELE in Bangladesh. They offered financial and consultancy support in different projects with reference to developing textbooks, methodology, pedagogy and teacher training. Such linguistic imperialism was planned in the British colonial period and the British Council in its Annual Report (1963–64) admitted that it is not a charity foundation and it serves the long-term interests of Britain in all its works (Pennycook, 2017).

English Language Policies (ELEPs) in Bangladesh

Since 1971, Bangladesh formed several education policies. The chronological summary of different policy documents (from 1971 to 2010, *Adapted from: Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014*) in Bangladesh showcases the picture:

Policy Documents

- 1972 - The Constitution of Bangladesh
- 1974 - Bangladesh Education Commission
- 1976 - English Teaching Taskforce Commission
- 1988 - Bangladesh National Education Commission
- 2000 - National Education Policy (NEP)
- 2003 - National Education Commission (NEC)
- 2010 - National Education Policy (NEP)

Chowdhury and Kabir (2014) mentioned that even though the first Education Commission in 1974 aimed to decolonise the education system and effectively exile English from the country, English had always remained a top priority in the school curriculum. They further stated that Bangla was chosen through a nationalistic favouritism while the dominance of English remained as a symbol of prestige and socio-intellectual elitism. They called this friction between two languages ‘Language Wars’ where English eventually became triumphant as the NEP-2010 declared English as a compulsory subject to be taught from class -1 to 12 and even in the higher education.

Canagarajah (2005) calls the history of Bangladesh Education Policy a ‘post-colonial puzzle’. These policy decisions seem to have largely been leveraged by Western fallacy (Phillipson, 1992) – a fallacy of colonisation in the guise of globalisation. Globalisation, promoting the hegemonic interests of the West and their local collaborators, plays the role of ‘the Empire strikes back’ (Ashcroft et al., 1989) and disperses global capitalism in various forms in the context of Bangladesh.

English Language Education in Different Levels

In Bangladesh, according to the latest NEP-2010, there are five levels of education system. In every level except for tertiary education, English Medium, Bengali Medium and Madrassa System are available but the private organizations have a monopoly in Pre-primary level only since the government doesn't have any pre-primary policy yet. Tiny tots are enrolled in pre-primary level (three classes -Play Group, Nursery, Kindergarten) from the age of three to prepare them for getting admitted into famous private and government primary schools where the class one admission through lottery and tests is a big challenge for the students. The emphasis is more on ELE because renowned private schools want students with better English. The English medium schools and colleges are now more in demand than the government run public schools and colleges. From Bangla medium schools before enrolling to universities, students finish learning English as a compulsory subject for 12 years from class 1 to 12 in Secondary and Higher Secondary levels of studies.

Most of the Bangla medium students are not quite prepared for the present demands of English for communication. In Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams, students practice only reading and writing skills in English. There is no test of their listening and speaking abilities. On the other hand, the English medium schools follow British curriculum and students sit for GCE's O-Levels (Ordinary Levels) and A-Levels (Advanced Levels) exams under direct supervision of the British Council. These schools have now successfully been running in the big cities for quite a long time and expanding in other cities also. The qualified teachers always prefer to work here for better pay packages. That is why, Bangla medium schools and colleges outside big cities lack proficient English teachers. Madrassas (Alia and Qawmi) in Bangladesh have the lowest quality teachers in English as the salary is small. That is why, students are usually weak in English and a few of them qualify for higher education in the top private and public universities in Bangladesh.

Following the privatisation of primary and secondary education, the government approved the introduction of higher education in the private sector by promulgating the Private University Act in 1992 (Kabir, 2013). Historically this marks a milestone in Bangladesh's English education at the tertiary level. All private universities have been using English as medium of instruction from the very

beginning of their establishment. Though instructions in certain educational programs in tertiary level colleges and public universities are given in Bengali, the students and teachers have to depend on foreign books written in English for reference and additional information. NEP-2010 has suggested including English foundation courses to complete bachelor degree in any discipline. Almost all universities have either English or Language or Humanities Departments where English teachers are required to teach one or sometimes multiple English language courses in addition to other core courses.

Methodological Shifts in English Language Education

In the past, the ELE pedagogy in Bangladesh applied mostly the behavioristic knowledge transmission model where teachers were sages on the stages while the students were the passive recipients of lessons. Stereotypical face to face brick-and-mortar classrooms with chalk and talk method was very much predominant even though Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach replaced Grammar Translation Method (GTM) in paper and policy in the nineties. With time, ELE landscape had some ontological and epistemological reforms. For example, due to the emergence of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992, as cited in Fang et al., 2022) and the recent trends in teaching Global Englishes (Rose & Galloway, 2019 as cited in Fang et al., 2022), ELE gained acceleration with ‘multifaceted linguistic, cultural and multimodal practices’ (Fang et al, 2022, p.305) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) outnumbered the Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs). This reduced the ‘native-speakerism idealism’ (Fang et al, 2022, p.305), giving place to multi/translingualism’ (Cenoz & Gorter, 2019, as cited in Feng et al., 2022, p.306) in this ‘trans-era’ to promote a decolonizing pedagogy.

Researchers, teachers and policy makers were busy exploring new ways of effective physical classroom pedagogies when COVID-19 in early 2020 like a shockwave ushered in an era of emergency education with a novel pedagogical shift (Ping et al., 2022). Consequently, a pedagogical crisis emerged where technology was the ultimate savoir of the total educational system. Bangladesh had to struggle to adapt to the new techno-pedagogies.

ELE in the COVID Pandemic Period

During COVID pandemic, being social meant keeping distance. Bangladesh government closed all educational institutes from March 17 to 31, 2020 as part of its lockdown measure to prevent the spread of the virus (TBS Report, 2020). As the pandemic situation deteriorated, the government extended its lockdown several times and schools finally re-opened after 543 days of closure as the country's virus situation eased and more people were vaccinated (Al Jazeera, 2021). Even though education was disrupted, the system quite quickly responded to opportunities that digital technology offered in the form of online learning. The pandemic situation threw education at all levels into the remote learning mode. This new notion is named Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), proposed by Hodges et al. (2020) to describe this temporary shift of providing education by using alternative ways, due to crisis circumstances. Milman (2020) stated this as a new pedagogy and so, called it the 'pandemic pedagogy'. In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) on May 7 permitted the private universities to run classes and conduct exams online (Abdullah, 2020). On 25 June 2020, the public universities decided to start online classes in a flexible manner (Kamol, 2020).

Initially, it was a traumatic change for teachers, students and the concerned authorities. The shift to remote teaching was made in haste and without much needs analysis and policy processes (Persico et al., 2020) and therefore, was beset with difficulties and inadequacies. However, with time, private and public universities resorted to learning tools like Google classrooms (Jodoin, 2020), and classes were taken through Meet and Zoom links. Meanwhile, schools (primary and secondary) and colleges were issued government directives. With the help of UNICEF, the government offered remote learning programmes using TV, radio, mobile phones and internet platforms to reach a large number of students. In madrassas, students could follow the classes of the common subjects like English, Bengali and Mathematics through remote learning programmes. However, students of low-resource areas couldn't grab the facilities due to the lack of electronic devices and smart gadgets.

In Bangladesh, except for Open University, there was not much distance education, let alone online education which was considered as much easier and more flexible for learners than the actual face to face on-campus education before the COVID-19 pandemic. Online teaching-learning was a welcome

relief during this unpredictable situation even though both teachers and students were not prepared at all. Due to the emergency situation, institutions did not get an opportunity to systematically plan for this transition to adapt to the new set of teaching and learning practices.

Challenges Faced by the Teachers and Students

Teachers and learners in Bangladesh faced many challenges when education went online after COVID. Most of the teachers were not given any financial help from their respective institutions for buying the required technological tools (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). Again, the learners' poor socio-economic conditions did not allow them to buy devices for online classes (Alhumaid et al., 2020; Ela et al., 2021). The learners were not interested in playing an active role in classes (Efriana, 2021; Lukas & Yunus, 2021; Tarrayo et al., 2021). Online teaching-learning suffered from a lack of a reliable online assessment framework. Additionally, long screen time impacted teachers' and learners' mental and physical wellbeing.

Some other problems that affected the online education included slow internet speed, lack of smart devices, teachers' inability to make classes interactive, no control on ever-muted students while the teacher talk continued the whole class, lack of materials and resources, challenges of conducting tests reliably, no monitoring tool during tests, lack of camera to show the face, limitation of not observing all students on the screen together etc. What was more, teachers and students struggled initially with how to share a screen, set up questions in Google forms, and submit answers and assignments. Due to all these drawbacks and constraints, both teachers and students felt very monotonous and helpless.

ELE in Post-Vaccine Era

COVID has given rise to terms like New-normal and Next-normal and we are very quickly stepping into a time that will be called AC (After Corona/COVID) when the other term is BC (Before Corona/COVID). At this moment, after nearly three years of the pandemic and three doses of vaccination, there is a heightened concern among educationists regarding the nature and mode of teaching and learning. Almost all institutions adopted total virtual education before vaccination and blended/hybrid education after vaccination. It's true that during this pandemic, several Ed-Tech companies offered educational institutions, teachers, and students free access to some digital support

for the continuity of education, gaining millions of new users along the way (Grek & Landri, 2021). Google and Zoom have their free versions but they have limitations in case of usage without pay. Hence, many private institutions negotiated emergency contracts with these companies to acquire infrastructure, online platforms, and other solutions. For instance, almost all top private universities bought domains from Google to use Google Classroom with Meet link. The UGC purchased ZOOM and provided free accounts to public university teachers who can now take large classes and arrange live meetings of 300 participants at a time.

The low-resource schools, colleges and madrassas faced internet issues. Nevertheless, one big achievement of spreading internet revolution has been made possible by the mobile phone operator companies like Grameen Phone, Bangla Link, Robi, and Teletalk. Smartphones powered by Android and other latest sophistications are quite available among learners to learn English (Hossain, 2018). Sarker et al. (2019) found that e-learning attained considerable acceptance among most of the students who routinely spent time on internet and electronic devices regularly learning through online arrangements, like lecture videos, course information, postings of the fellow students in the forum and comments and suggestions of the teachers.

Although all academic organizations now have returned to physical classes like the pre-COVID time, many institutes developed academic portals where teachers upload the virtual forms of their lectures and instructions, and students can join the portal to learn ubiquitously (Chowdhury, 2020). Since the users of internet technology in Bangladesh have been increasing in the recent years swiftly, the country is obtaining vivid progress of digitalization which is gradually being utilized in creating an ever-existent ambience of active learning (Chowdhury, 2020). Additionally, the Learning Management System (LMS) the organizations created works as a disciplined database which they want to continue. That means, we have now entered a new era with a paradigm shift that has given rise to a new techno-pedagogy in Bangladesh. Almost all organizations have now digital identities as Bozkurt and Sharma (2020a) mention that institutions are forced to create new digital identities. In creating a digital presence, a digital twin needed to be birthed. So, we can see the Digital Twin (Batty, 2018; Datta, 2017; El Saddik, 2018) of every institute at present.

UGC Policy on Blended Learning

University Grants Commission (UGC) circulated a Policy on Blended Learning for Bangladesh (Approved in the 161st meeting of the Full Commission held on 27/02/2022) which has a link with the existing education policy. The manifesto of Vision-2021 that was later extended to 2041 to spark a spectacular progress of making a Digital Bangladesh has already emphasized on the integration of information technology (IT) by higher education institutes. Furthermore, the Strategic Plan for Higher Education (HEQEP, 2018) has instructed organizations to create an advanced e-learning environment much earlier than the pandemic strikes. Therefore, it has been easier in the pandemic period to integrate IT into the teaching-learning environment by building infrastructure capacities and experiences.

However, to incorporate blended learning, an octagonal framework (Khan, 2005) is prescribed. This framework consists of eight dimensions – (i) Institutional dimension: the organization's preparedness in terms of administrative and academic matters and student services, (ii) Pedagogical dimension: consistency between course content and the learners' needs and method to deliver the content, (iii) Technological dimension: aspects related to infrastructure planning as well as accessibility to necessary hardware and software, (iv) Interface design: look and feel of page, site, and content design, and navigation that enables learners to use and switch between different delivery methods, (v) Evaluation: assessing the learners as well as the instruction and learning environment, (vi) Management: maintaining the learning environment and managing content delivery, (vii) Resource support dimension: online support and the resources required to create meaningful learning environments and (viii) Ethical considerations: cultural and geographical diversity, etiquette, equal opportunity, and legal issues. Seven broad policies are also proposed to introduce blended learning into universities – (i) Readiness of universities to incorporate blended learning, (ii) Adopting appropriate pedagogy for blended learning, (iii) Necessary technological infrastructure, (iv) Effective design, (v) Proper assessment strategies, (vi) Developing and maintaining infrastructure and (vii) Considering ethics, culture, equality, and legal issues.

Policy Requirement of a Transformative Pedagogy

Language policies, by definition, are optimistic (Ozolins, 1996) but they should not be just political eyewash giving false promises to the citizens for only winning in elections. The ELEP should adopt inclusive education (IE) to ensure access, participation and achievement of all students including those from diverse backgrounds (UNESCO, 1994). Teachers' recruitment should be fair and they must have better pays and sufficient training as we can see in Nordic countries like Finland. Education is to foster and conserve democracy and democratic values with a view to humanizing students with better manners so that they can act as responsible citizens and exhibit leadership qualities. Reforms are necessary for democratization of education. English for sustainable development (ESD) is also required to form an action-oriented transformative pedagogy, characterized by elements such as self-directed learning, participation and collaboration, problem-orientation and inter and transdisciplinarity, as well as the linking of formal and informal learning. Adopting an action-oriented transformative pedagogy for education, in views of Mezirow (1997), can create "a workforce that can adapt to changing conditions of employment, exercise critical judgement as it manages technology systems, and flexibly engage in more effective collaborative decision making" (p.8). Many now agree, transformative pedagogy leads to quality education for sustainable development where people's sense of responsibility better prepares them for the world they will inherit (UNESCO, 2015). In particular, it emphasizes a humanistic vision of education as an essential common good, transcends its use as a utilitarian tool for economic development and stresses its capacity as a tool to promote inclusivity and universal ethical principles.

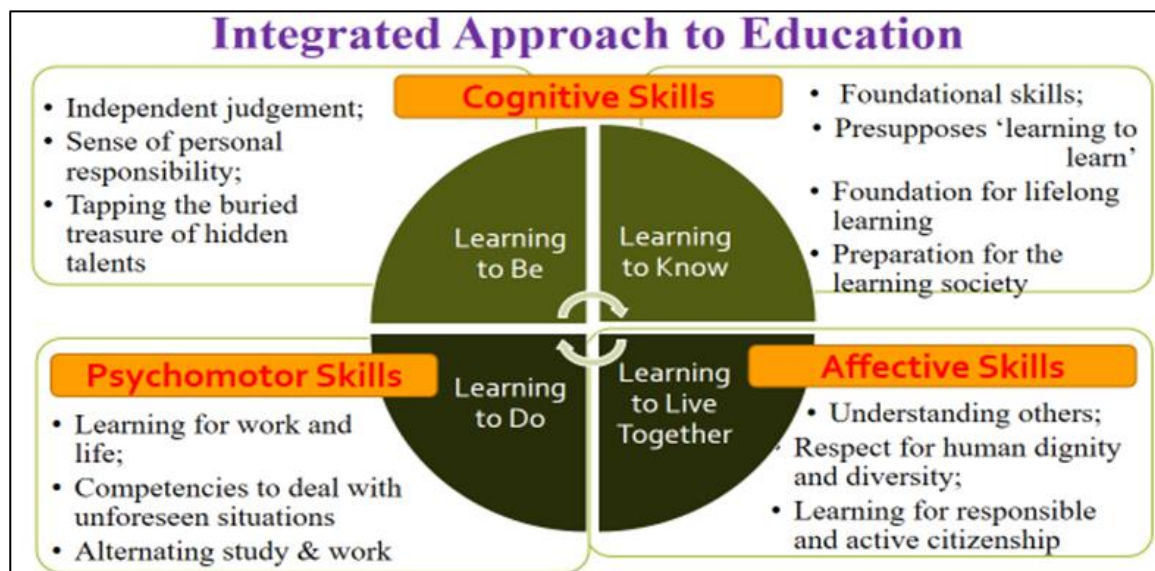
Envisioning a Way Forward

To keep pace with the New-normal and step effectively into the Next-normal, digital skills are mandatory for all stakeholders of education. Every teacher and student needs to master soft skills and emotional intelligence in addition to their hard skills to be a transformed shield that is unbreakable against any odd. More focus has to be given to make training modules for all to navigate digital tools without troubles; create digital-friendly content and curricula, IT infrastructure, flexible but output oriented instructions of tasks and activities; apply new cutting-edge technologies for the 'digital natives'; explore cost-effective models of blended learning; provide access to all students including

those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, students in poor environments; build public–private partnerships (PPPs) e.g. partnerships with telecom companies for connectivity to bridge the digital divide and allow universal access to education. On top of everything, approving a budget for materializing changes, reengineering education with proper policy reforms, nominating skilled manpower, building institutions of excellence with state-of-the art facilities to accelerate quality education, establishing institutional quality assurance cells and a powerful national accreditation council, adopting eclectic and transformative pedagogic approaches in case of ELE and overall creating motivation for lifelong education for the greater good of the humanity are a dire need of the time.

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is prescribed by UNESCO that established 17 SDG goals to be fulfilled by all its member countries within 2030. In essence, ESD takes the form of an action-oriented transformative pedagogy or eco-pedagogy which is characterized by self-directed learning, participation and collaboration, problem-orientation and inter and transdisciplinarity as well as the linking of formal and informal learning. Sustainable solutions address society’s developmental problems improving ecological life (air, freshwater, oceans, forests and soils). All learners should acquire knowledge and skills through sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity.

UNESCO mandated two commissions – one (in 1972) chaired by Edgar Faure (The French Education Minister), the other (in 1996) by Jacques Delors (The 8th president of European Commission). Both reports questioned the validity of not only the existing systems of modern education but also the society as a whole. The Delors Report proposed an integrated vision of education based on the two concepts - learning throughout life and the four pillars of education (learning to know, to do, to live together and to be). I have developed the following Education Model for Bangladesh combining the four pillars of Delors Report and the three domains of learning, known as KSA- Knowledge (Cognitive), Skills (Psychomotor) and Attitudes (Affective), advocated by Benjamin Bloom (Cognitive domain in 1956), David Krathwohl (Affective domain in 1964) and Anita Harrow (Psychomotor domain by the 1970s):



All the required renovations regarding policy, curricula and content for future education should be made as per this model. Only then we can get a human capital out of our future generations.

Conclusion

This article dived deep into the history of ELE in Bangladesh and showed that ELE was inherited from the British as part of their linguistic imperialism. However, after 1971, there were a few attempts to decolonize ELE. Because of the increasing number of non-native English language teachers and learners, English in the local context is more important to learn than the King's or Queen's English. Hence, the dimension and pedagogy of ELE saw some methodological shifts. COVID-19 shocked the total education system in March 2020 and forced it to move online through mandatory ICT integration. Although there were some initial hiccups, it was a blessing in disguise. Education shifted from on-site to on-line and then to hybrid modes. Now it is back to the physical classrooms surrounded by the four walls but the digital twin of the class (Google class) is still in action. It's time to turn this crisis into an opportunity by reimagining, redesigning and recalibrating education to make it accessible, equitable, and inclusive so that learners "can navigate, traverse and pollinate multiple paths, dimensions and layers of a true learning ecology, where learners can find their true selves" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020b, p. vii). Care and empathy-centred pedagogy should be the default mode applied in education in the Next-normal.

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