

The Development of Modern English

Contributors: Raqib Chowdhury, Ariful Haq Kabir, et al.



About the Book

The English language is considered to be the world language of today. It has an extensive amount of words not found in other languages and its rich vocabulary may sufficiently accommodate all the situations of a social and technical nature. But, even at the maximum height of its evolution (which took a full 1,500 years since the arrival of the Germanic people in England in the 5th century AD) could you be sure of the spellings of the names of people or their pronunciations unless you are told? Isn't it a dilemma that the vowels have no fixed sound or phonetic value, like, father, eye, now, son, sun, where a, e, o and u, all of them sound as a, (long or short), and o is either o or a as in Joan, John, Johnny? It is because the basic alphabetic structure was scientifically wrong from the very beginning; and this is the case with all other languages of the world.

The Development of Modern English focuses on the facts of language rather than on any of the various contemporary theoretical approaches to the study of those facts. The presentation is that of fairly traditional grammar and philology, so as not to require students to master a new theoretical approach at the same time they are exploring the intricacies of language history.

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Kabir**

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Preface

The English language is considered to be the world language of today. It has an extensive amount of words not found in other languages and its rich vocabulary may sufficiently accommodate all the situations of a social and technical nature. But, even at the maximum height of its evolution (which took a full 1,500 years since the arrival of the Germanic people in England in the 5th century AD) could you be sure of the spellings of the names of people or their pronunciations unless you are told? Isn't it a dilemma that the vowels have no fixed sound or phonetic value, like, *father*, *eye*, *now*, *son*, *sun*, where *a*, *e*, *o* and *u*, all of them sound as *a*, (long or short), and *o* is either *o* or *a* as in *Joan*, *John*, *Johnny*? It is because the basic alphabetic structure was scientifically wrong from the very beginning; and this is the case with all other languages of the world.

The Development of Modern English focuses on the facts of language rather than on any of the various contemporary theoretical approaches to the study of those facts. The presentation is that of fairly traditional grammar and philology, so as not to require students to master a new theoretical approach at the same time they are exploring the intricacies of language history.

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LANGUAGE WARS: ENGLISH EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE IN BANGLADESH

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Keywords: English language, English education, Education policy, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Since its relatively recent independence in 1971, a total of seven national Education Commissions were formed, all of which placed various degrees of emphasis on the planning, pedagogy and learning of English in Bangladesh. Although the first Education Commission in 1974 aimed to 'decolonise' the education system and effectively exile English from the country, English has always remained a top priority in the school curriculum. Studies have linked this to residual colonial legacy inherited from the British education system.

In the backdrop of persistent nationalistic favouritism towards Bengali, English is still widely an area-specific language confined to academia, and English education is often still seen as a purely instrumentalist endeavour. However it is also important as a symbol of socio-intellectual elitism and prestige. Such mixed, often incongruous positions can be seen reflected in the way successive National Education Policies have interacted with Commissions, which some critics have pointed out were formed by various regimes to advance their political agenda and ideology rather than to further the country's pragmatic needs and achieve well-articulated and time-sensitive policy outcomes.

This article critically reviews the major trends of English education policy as enacted through four decades of reform and how English has played out in the education system in a developing country fast emerging as a rich ground of alternative educational research.

Through a brief chronology of education policy and commissions and drawing on the comparative shifts of emphasis on English through their recommendations over a period of four decades, the article situates the place of English within the pragmatics of a postcolonial mindset and the socio-cultural expectations of stakeholders, and deals with the complexities of transition from policy to practice. In particular it problematises the almost irreconcilable friction between English and Bengali forged through the nationalistic sentiment born in the Language Movement of 1952, an episode unique in the history of the world. Rather than looking into the politics of policy planning and implementation, it looks towards the possibility of an education system that can bring about a healthy juxtaposition between heritage and modernity.

INTRODUCTION

Because of its undeniable role in human capital development in an increasingly globalised world, English is now widely accepted as having immense potential for individuals and societies. Indeed engagement with the global economy presupposes the acceptance of English as central to accessing the global market. Consequently, many countries in Asia, for example, the South East Asian countries, where English has been used as foreign language over decades, have adopted the teaching and learning of English in their education policies in response to the realities of a more globally connected world. Most countries in this region have long been concerned that incompetency in English language may result in keeping them lagged behind in taking economic advantages from the momentum generated by globalisation, of which English is arguably a major driving force. For example in 2001, the Chinese government introduced English as a compulsory subject in Class 3 in all elementary schools and instructed all public colleges and universities to use English as the main teaching language for technology and business related subjects (Nunan [2003]). This resulted in massive changes through which China opened up to the English speaking world, in terms of trade and commerce, education and training, as well as through politics and development.

In the Indian subcontinent the colonial British rulers adopted the British education system in order to use education as a political tool aimed to prolong their domination (Altbach [2008]). Despite being nearly 80 years since the colonisers left, in current day Bangladesh the use, teaching and learning of English language and education still mark a conspicuous continuity with the colonial period, while at the same time sustained friction between English and a nationalistic fervour in favour of Bengali can be felt to often surface in popular rhetoric. Such friction has created almost irreconcilable fractures in formulating unproblematic language policies in the country. This article deals with the major trends of the policies related to English education as enacted through four decades of reform and how the practice of English education has played out in the education system in Bangladesh. In doing so it critically juxtaposes the perceived statuses of English with Bengali in order to highlight and understand the ongoing clash between the two languages.

A large body of research has shown how education policy in Bangladesh has been embroiled in vested political interests from the very beginning of its emergence as an independent nation in 1971. Sadeque (2000, in Rahman [2010]), for example reports the general lack of policy direction in Bangladesh's education sector, while Unterhalter et al. ([2003]) lament the futility of politics and the 'fragile dialogue' between policy makers and practitioners of English that have always characterised Bangladesh's education policy. Policy and practice have been 'fragmented and inconsistent' (Imam [2005]), and to a large extent researchers have blamed this on the tendency of research and education policy development predominantly being the preserve of elite groups associated with the government (Unterhalter et al. [2003]), and education policy and reform historically being largely dictated by international funding rather than expert opinion (Hamid [2009]). In his comprehensive study on the relevance of humanities education in Bangladesh, Rahman ([2010]) has labelled the education system as characterised by 'internal and external inefficiency', devoid of 'productivity... and clear-cut objectives... and policy directions', 'stagnant', 'inadequate', 'out-dated', 'limited', and one that 'produces graduates with no productive skills' (p. 5). A newspaper report summarises the system as 'still sunk in theoretical or textbook education' (New Nation 2005, in Rahman [2010], p. 5). [Aminuzzaman (n.d.)] argues that the quality of education in Bangladesh has 'declined steadily, in some cases quite alarmingly, over the last two decades' and has been said to be 'characterised by a mismatch of the objectives and the curriculum' (Ali [2004], n.p.) - a discontinuity marked most conspicuously in English education. Rahman regrets that the country still confronts a dilemma on the language issue - should the medium of instruction be English or the mother tongue? Similarly Johanson ([2000]) bemoans the lack of a visionary plan and lack of policy in relation to English in Bangladesh. Indeed the acknowledgement of such deteriorating quality in education comes from within policy makers themselves - the 2003 National Education Committee (NEC) itself lamented the conspicuous lack of a language policy for Bangladesh.

While the education sector has seen successive expansion initiatives, such expansion has predominantly been 'linear' and quantitative, rather than 'vertical' or qualitative (Rahman [2010], p. 75). Although successive education commissions formed under various regimes dealt with these issues, little has been achieved due to ruling politicians' motivations in furthering their political agenda and ideology with little regard for the country's needs, rendering all attempts futile (Mazumder [2009]; Roy 1998 in Rahman [2010]). In particular the volatile political situation of post-independence Bangladesh - the political turmoil of the mid-1970s, followed by the military coup of 1981 and a number of years of political repression, martial law, suppression of democracy, political volatility and stagnancy, have marked frustrating disjuncture in any attempt to produce a coherent, consistent and time-sensitive English language policy.

In the context of the relatively new nation of Bangladesh, these national education policies have been founded on a long chronology of slow development that can be traced back to the 200 year span of the British colonial period. The current 2010 Education Policy is the embodiment of trial and error of no less than five committees and commissions since Bangladesh's independence just over four decades ago. Despite differences in policy directions and emphases, what has consistently been at the forefront of these policy recommendations is an emphasis on reinforcing the emotive rhetoric (Unterhalter et al. [2003]) of national identity forged in the Liberation War of 1971, which is seen as the nurturing ground of socio-economic development of the nation. Such strong sentimental ties naturally link closely to the powerful unifying factor of the nation's linguistic identity which constitutes the main concern of this paper. From 1998 to the present Bangladesh has seen a more or less steady economic growth which has nurtured the overall quality of education (Unterhalter et al. [2003]) and consistent efforts in modernising the curriculum. With government policies finally acknowledging the need for qualitative improvement rather than quantitative expansion, there is glimmer of hope and certainty.

The next section situates the place of English within the current educational scenario of Bangladesh. It then presents a brief chronology of education policy and commissions. The final part of the article looks into the comparative shifts of emphasis on English through these policies and commission recommendations over a period of four decades. The article then indicates implications of the review in terms of its relevance to the current global context and concludes with a discussion on the implications of findings as well as suggestions in favour of the possibility of an education system that can bring about a healthy juxtaposition between heritage and modernity.

The study

This critical review is based on a qualitative analysis of a range of policy documents (1971 - present) formulated by the different governments in the education sector at the state level in Bangladesh. The policy documents included a number of national education policies as well as commission reports, including the Bangladesh Education Commission Report - 1974, the English Teaching Taskforce Commission - 1976, the Bangladesh National Education Commission Report - 1988, the National Curriculum Committee - 1991, the National Education Policy - 2000, the Bari Commission Report - 2002, the Miah Commission Report - 2004, and the National Education Policy - 2010. Policy documents can be treated as primary resources (Prior [2011]) to explore the historical development of English education and how English has played out in the education system in Bangladesh. Instead of attempting to understand positivist 'what' questions, we have asked constructivist 'why' questions (Darlaston-Jones [2007]) to unearth underlying ideologies and power relations embedded in the policies and reports. This approach allowed us to go beyond the physical entity of the documents to gain insights into the surrounding sociocultural and political contexts surrounding the production of these policy documents.

Situating English and English education in Bangladesh

The relative importance of a local language and English are not static, or, in themselves, good or bad. Nor can it be argued that promotion of the local language at the cost of English or vice-versa necessarily compromises either language. One's cultural and/or national identity is inevitably language dependent. This however becomes problematic when we consider that in the popular rhetoric of Bangladesh's national identity and learning, English has been historically positioned as antagonistic rather than complementary. Critics have pointed out that this can be seen as residual colonial mentality that continues to plague to implementation of education policies that favour the promotion of English across the nation's educational system. The ongoing friction between Bengali and English, both in policy and practice, and in the quintessential cultural temperament in the nation has left deep scars in the formation of an acceptable language policy to date.

Indeed the 2003 National Education Commission (NEC) pointed out that the indecision about a clear-cut language policy has brought the higher education sector to 'the verge of a disaster' (Rahman [2010], p. 93), with higher education students generally remaining poor in *both* Bengali and English. The Commission recommended the government to take measures in urgently formulating a National Language Policy to overcome the current confusion surrounding the issue of language, especially at the higher education level. In particular, to ensure that promotion of English did not compromise with Bengali, the government attempted to *balance* English and Bengali in national policies (Hamid [2009]), as will be discussed in the next section.

Currently English is taught as a compulsory subject from Classes 1 to 12 in the national curriculum. With over 17 million children learning English, Bangladesh boasts one of the largest primary second language (L2) English populations in the world (Hamid & Honan [2012], p. 141). Hamid and Honan ([2012]) point out that considering monolingual Bangladesh's per capita income (US\$540) [currently US\$1190, according to BBS, 2014] and Human

Development Index (HDI) ranking (146th out of 189 countries), the state commitment to English seems to be 'ambitious and astounding', however at the same time, it is also very 'reasonable' and 'entirely appropriate' when we consider the discourses that link the English language with social and economic development in today's globalised world. In Bangladesh English is used as an international link language and unlike in neighbouring India, it is hardly a tool for interpersonal communication. Despite this, English has firmly established itself as an essential part of the country's socio-cultural and economic life due to its extensive use for specific purposes in education and research, commerce and international communication, as noted by a host of researchers (see Roshid [2014]; Chowdhury & Farooqui [2011]; Rahman [2010]; Chowdhury & Le Ha [2008]; Chowdhury [2003]; Banu & Sussex [2001]).

Although English has been taught compulsorily in schools from primary to secondary level, students' performance in English is generally still found to be very poor (Chowdhury & Kamal [2014]). Imam ([2005]), for example reports that the average English language skill level of a university student is equivalent to the Class 7 level. In response to this problem, the government introduced Communicative English Teaching (CLT) in Class 6 in 1996, which has been extended up to Class 12 on an incremental basis since then (Podder [2013]; Mazumder [2013]). To supplement the government's efforts, various externally funded projects and programs have also been implemented - for example, the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP- 1997-2001) funded by Department of International Development (DFID, UK), the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP 2002-2008, Phases I & II) funded by World Bank, the Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project (SESIP-1999-2006) funded by Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Teaching Quality Improvement Project in Secondary Education (TQI-SEP 2006-2016, Phases I & II) funded by ADB and Canadian International and Development Agency (CIDA), in order to train secondary school teachers based on CLT. Some programs have also been implemented by non-government organisations such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) with a view to further developing English education (Podder [2013]).

Of note among these initiatives, in 2008 a nine year project, English in Action (EIA 2008-2017) was designed by the government with assistance from the Department of International Development (DFID, UK). Aiming to equip 30 million people with English language skills to enable them to engage in economic activities more effectively, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC World), Open University, UK and Open Learning Systems Educational Trust, South Africa have been working together in this project which emphasised the achievement of economic growth by providing English language as a tool for better access to the economy. The target group of this project is both the current and future workforce of Bangladesh, irrespective of their demographic and geographical locations, particularly school age children at the primary level. The project consists of three phases and together they include TV and radio programs to highlight the importance of learning English, introducing effective methodology of English language teachers through training, and developing institutional capacity to deliver future programs and courses. It is expected that an English language policy for the government of Bangladesh will also develop in this phase. In the third phase the project is expected to be institutionalised *within* the government and the formal education system so that a functional and feasible model of effective English language teaching can be ensured through media and outreach programs (Sergeant & Erling [2011]).

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 [2010], [2012], [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 (University Grants Commission [2011]) from 1992 onwards. In the face of increasing competition, public universities have continued to optimise their practice of using English as medium of instruction with most departments introducing fundamental/foundation courses on English language to develop English language skills to compete with local and global demands. The availability of lucrative credit-transfer arrangements with universities in English-speaking countries means that in private universities English is now considered even more as a prospective pathway to acquiring academic credentials of a more 'global' (and almost always 'Western') standard.

Education commissions and committees: a brief chronology

Both in the British period (1757-1947) and in the Pakistan period (1947-1971), the education system of the nation remained a contested space of uneven yet firm political interest. The now infamous Macaulay Minute of 1835 on Education conveniently positioned English literature as superior its oriental counterpart. Bureaucratically inspired and culturally patronising, the Minute allowed the colonisers to offer English education to create a class of obedient Indian administrators in the mould of British taste and attitudes. Once the British occupation ended in 1947, the then East Bengal (currently Bangladesh) became part of Pakistan, a neo-colonial state, in the name of the predominantly