Chapter 13
Revisioning English Studies in Bangladesh in the Age of Globalisation and ELT

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Abstract This chapter begins with the premise that English Studies in Bangladesh is now going through a critical period and is beset by these problems: (a) the suspicion and anxiety created over decades in many Bangladeshi minds about linguistic encroachment and fear of an imperial language marginalising Bengali in public life yet again and the resulting perceived threat to the native language and culture; (b) the commodification of the language, which is the consequence of globalisation and the consequent imposition of pedagogies that have led to the attenuation of the language and the diminished capacity to teach it effectively and creatively; (c) the unplanned expansion of the education system and proliferation of teaching methods that go against effective learning, promote impractical pedagogies and concentrate on results rather than teaching; and (d) the conversion of the universities of Bangladesh in general and English departments of these universities in particular into places for churning out graduates who can meet the job market's demands in the quickest and most facile manner without regard for in-depth knowledge and a pedagogy that is critical and humanistic in orientation. The chapter begins by commenting on the results of the University of Dhaka's Arts Faculty Admission test of 2014 and goes on to link it to the English language teaching situation in our schools and colleges. It then attempts to connect this situation to the condition of English language teaching in our universities after the grammar-translation method was vilified, the British Council sponsored ELT valorised and the use of literary texts denigrated from the 1980s onwards. The chapter concludes by suggesting how a positive paradigm shift can be achieved to improve the condition of English Studies in Bangladesh by combining critical methods derived from literature and insights derived from accumulated experience, language education, recent theory, critical pedagogy and current best practices effectively and sequentially.

Keywords English education · Globalisation · ELT · Commodification of education · Higher education

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Introduction: The Crises in English Studies in Bangladesh in Our Time

This chapter, which I write in the form of a testimonio, based on my own lifetime experiences, as well as personal and professional values, is premised on the realisation that English Studies (in this chapter referring to both the study of English literature and the study of English language – often, but not always, separately) in Bangladesh is currently undergoing a critical period and is beset by these problems: (a) the suspicion and anxiety created over decades in many Bangladeshi minds about an imperial language's persistent linguistic encroachment, the resulting perceived threat to the native language and culture that has led to English language teaching and learning being cornered for decades since the Liberation War of 1971 that led to the birth of Bangladesh; (b) the increasing commodification of the language in the country under the aegis of the British Council since the 1980s because of neoliberal policies adopted by Britain as well as other Western countries from the time of Margaret Thatcher, the consequent imposition of pedagogies that have led to the attenuation of the language and the diminished capacity to teach it effectively and creatively; (c) the unplanned expansion of the education system and proliferation of teaching methods in Bangladesh that have been going against effective learning and the creation of an assessment system that has focused on results and not on teaching; and (d) the conversion of the universities of Bangladesh in general and English departments of these universities in particular into places for churning out graduates who can meet the job market's demands in the quickest and most facile manner without regard either for in-depth knowledge or for pedagogy that is critical and humanistic in orientation from the 1990s onwards.

I will begin the chapter itself, however, by commenting on the results of the University of Dhaka's fairly recent Arts Faculty Admission test of 2014 and go on to link the results to the unsatisfactory English language teaching situation in our schools and colleges. I will then attempt to connect this atrophied state to the condition of English language teaching in our universities after the marginalisation of English after the country's independence in 1971. Next, I will attempt to show the worsening of the situation after the grammar-translation method was vilified, the British Council sponsored ELT valorised and the use of literary texts denigrated from the 1980 onwards. I will then move on to show how the situation deteriorated even further by the turn of the last century because of quantitative expansion in the education system as well as the failure to implement the ELT-inspired reforms that had effectively replaced the older forms of teaching in the country. I will conclude the paper by suggesting how a positive paradigm shift can be achieved to improve the condition of English Studies in Bangladesh by combining critical methods derived from literature and insights derived from accumulated experience, language education and theoretical developments of recent decades, critical pedagogy and current best practices.

A Tell-Tale Test and the State of English Studies in Bangladesh

The Bdnews24.com lead feature of September 2014 registers the dire state of English language learning in Bangladesh and reveals the failure of the English language pedagogy in place in the country plainly and unambiguously: 'Only Two Eligible for Dhaka University's English Department[1]'. The feature is about how out of the nearly 1700 students who had sat for the Elective English paper admission test only two were able to meet the minimum requirements set by the university's English departmental teachers who had devised the test to ensure that only students with the competence necessary to study English at the tertiary level were admitted to the undergraduate programme. The tests revealed how poorly prepared the students were; 12 years of English education at the primary, secondary, and higher secondary level had apparently not prepared them for the kind of language skills they would require to study in the English department. In the online postings that followed the news feature, one reader draws an obvious sobering conclusion from the episode: 'obviously English is not being taught in the general schools' that supply the University of Dhaka with students for its undergraduate programmes. Another reader of the piece suggests that the dismal state of English language learning revealed by the over 99% failure rate was due to 'the English hating ambience' prevailing in the country and the continuing perception that the language is 'elitist and…anti-Bengali'. Another reader laments the state of things when 'only two students out of the nation of 150 million qualify for Dept. of English at [the] national university of Bangladesh' ('Only Two Eligible…', 2014). Still another reader takes it on himself to defend the teachers who framed the test and set the minimum standard to be achieved for students intending to come to the department, noting that they are in the know as far as the level of competence required to study English at the university level is concerned, being academics with the knowledge and experience required for setting such tests.[2]

Was the admission test too difficult? Not really; they were only a little harder than the 'general English' tests held before and almost equal to the 'Advanced English' tests held in previous years for students whose other tongue is not English and who did not study in schools that follow the curriculum adopted for board examinations. In fact, the test was set by two of the senior-most professors of the department on the basis of questions submitted by five of its other teachers; all these

[1] Officially, the institution is known as the University of Dhaka, but in Bangladesh it is known popularly as 'Dhaka University'. In other words, both versions of the institute's name are in use.

[2] In the end, it must be noted, only 70 out of 140 places were filled in the department's 1st-year programme that year, after the admission 'elective English bar' was lowered to 12 from the 17 that had been announced as the minimum score required to be admitted to the department. However, 20 or so of these students withdrew, and so the English department of the university ended up with a class of 52. The department is being blamed covertly, and the test has been dropped this year without consulting it, and we have had to revert to the old system of testing in admitting students. It can be pointed out here that the University of Dhaka is not only the oldest and premier university of the nation but the largest. Competition for the seats to this institution is always intense.

teachers had plentiful experience of framing such tests and the desire to admit students good enough to cope with the standards required to carry on undergraduate studies in English.[3]

So why did so many students fail? If the test was not difficult, what caused this debacle? The answers to these questions are manifold and indicate a problematic situation. However one thing is even more obvious in hindsight: the extraordinarily poor performance of the students in the test amounted to an indictment of English language policies adopted by successive governments after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, the current English language teaching situation, the curriculum and pedagogic practices adopted by the country's educators with foreign help in the 1980s, the textbooks prescribed and the state of classroom teaching in the country. The rest of the paper is an attempt to account for the dismal state of English education in Bangladesh reflected in the test results and to discuss the possibility of a paradigm shift that may redress the situation.

Linguistic Nationalism and the Decline of English Studies in Bangladesh

Bangladesh was born in 1971 because of events that had their roots in linguistic nationalism. An intense movement in favour of Bengali began in what was East Pakistan in the late 1940s and the early 1950s of the last century. When this language, spoken by almost all East Pakistanis, was relegated to the second position, and Urdu, the language spoken by not so many West Pakistanis and only a few East Pakistanis, was declared to be Pakistan's only state language, there was a violent outburst in the eastern part of Pakistan that lead to the death of a number of East Pakistanis on February 21, 1952. This event was the beginning of the end of East Pakistan, for the Language Movement would subsequently escalate into full-scale opposition to West Pakistan.[4] In other words, it was linguistic nationalism that decisively sparked the independence movement of Bangladesh and that led to the end of the Pakistani state formed from the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

Not surprisingly, the nascent state of Bangladesh decided to adopt a policy of promoting Bengali wholeheartedly in public life and implementing the use of Bengali vigorously in all spheres. But the animus against Urdu and the angry reaction against the imposition of an alien language system on East Pakistanis in the Pakistan period soon lead to a denigration of English language learning in independent Bangladesh. The righteous indignation that led Bangladeshis to despise those who would make Urdu the only state language of the people of East Pakistan

[3] I must admit here that I was one of the two academics who 'moderated' the test on the basis of the five tests submitted by other senior colleagues. The other academic was the Dean of Arts. Both of us had many years' experience of setting such tests.

[4] The movement led not merely to the birth of Bangladeshi in 1971 but eventually to the day being adopted as the International Mother Language Day by the United Nations on January 9, 1998.

would propel Bengalis in the eastern province to wage a full-scale war of liberation in 1971. In independent Bangladesh the resentment against Urdu was reincarnated as suspicion of English language education; there was much disapproval and even condemnation at the use of English in officialdom.

No doubt remembering that Bangladesh's recent history was marked by two colonial periods – that of the British rule as well as the Pakistani interregnum – the new leaders of Bangladesh concentrated on steps that would lead increasingly to the marginalisation of English in the country. The language would, as a result, be taught weakly for at least two decades at the secondary as well as the primary levels, and purposively only in a handful of English-medium schools in urban areas. In 1974, the first Bangladesh Education Commission recommended that at most English could be given priority as a foreign language and should be taught from Class 6 (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014); even the 1988 Bangladesh National Education Commission recommended that Grade 3 be the starting point for English learning. Moreover, English would be taught during this period at the higher secondary level on the basis of a downsized and simplified curriculum. Significantly, at the tertiary level, English would not be used anymore in universities except in the English department, a few of other departments and a handful of institutions of higher education. There was an assumption that was widespread at this time that English was a language that creates class disparity and makes jobs as well as higher education a reserve of the upper class. In short, there were responsible people in Bangladesh who did their best to ensure throughout the 1970s and 1980s and even in the early 1990s of the last century that English education be downgraded and the language made to look responsible for all sorts of discriminatory policies in society and even a source of cultural blight.

In their reforming and nationalistic zeal, no one responsible for the language policy of the newly independent country or even for education reform as a whole in Bangladesh seemed to have noticed that in neighbouring West Bengal, no citizen learned Bengali inadequately, despite having English being taught at all levels and despite the widespread use of English for official purposes as well as in higher education. They did not notice either that literature written in Bengali flourished as always in West Bengal, despite the use of English in tertiary education and in officialdom since the British period. To put this somewhat differently, the animus that had been directed against Urdu in East Pakistan seemed to have been redirected against English at this time in Bangladesh by not a few people in power and those in charge of education policy and reform, even though the archetypal colonisers had departed by 1947 and the Pakistanis by 1971.

Indeed, in the 1970s, heady with a cocktail made out of nationalism and socialism, and oblivious of the dangers of chauvinism, some 'progressive' intellectuals had cried out loudly against English, forgetting that it had nothing to do with the Pakistani interregnum in our part of the world. Things got worse when in the 1980s General Ershad seized power and resorted to linguistic nationalism as another ploy to win over people to his illegal regime. Resorting to populist policies to woo citizens, he declared that English would no longer be taught in degree colleges. His decree would deliver another body blow to English language teaching and learning,

since most primary and secondary school teachers of that period were recruited from such colleges.

In sum, in independent Bangladesh, the 1970s and 1980s saw a reduction of the importance of English in public life and a steep decline in English language teaching and learning standards. Almost all school-going students would now begin acquiring English rather late and would only be able to learn the basics of the language somehow and that too for only a few years. Knowing English was no longer considered essential for higher education or most government jobs; many private companies too were now content to hire graduates who knew little or almost no English since everyone in the marketplace was carrying out transactions almost entirely in Bengali.

It should be stressed here too that a sizable number of competent English language teachers had begun departing the country after partition of the subcontinent, since they were Hindus. The remaining ones who had graduated from universities and were Muslim Bengalis or the Hindus who had stayed behind would be retiring by the 1980s and 1990s. Teachers graduating from degree colleges now had only a little exposure to English learning; consequently, there would be a scarcity of competent English teachers for public schools and colleges from then onwards. In two decades, thus, the curriculum as well as the pedagogy had been affected adversely; less English was being taught to students by teachers who had learned less of it.

A good introduction to the 'sustained friction between English and a nationalistic fervour in favour of Bengali' (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, p. 2) that had surfaced thus in Bangladesh in the 1970s and 1980s can be found in 'Language Wars: English Education Policy and Practice in Bangladesh' by Chowdhury and Kabir. Referring to others who had written about the decline in English education and expressed concern that this is at the root of the decline in educational standards in the country, they indicate that for Bangladeshis, for a long time, the 'friction between Bengali and English' had been detrimental to English teaching and learning. They also underscore the uncertainty about the importance of English education at any level and point to doubts about the necessity of teaching it at the expense of Bengali as 'an ongoing' thing. The very useful 'chronological survey' table they provide of English in educational policy in Bangladesh reveals clearly that it was only in 1992 that English was recommended as a compulsory subject in Class I in independent Bangladesh after these anxieties and suspicions were countered by the demand for learning English that were being increasingly articulated at this time. However, they see no coherent and sustained English language policy adopted afterwards for some time afterwards. They stress that any survey of English language policy at the state level in Bangladesh would reveal the lack of well-thought-out national English language policies adopted by the country till well into the new millennium when in 2010, the National Education Policy was formulated and then implemented. The consequence was that English failed to become in effect 'an "institutionalized additional language" [Kachru]' in Bangladesh as it had become in the neighbouring countries of India and Sri Lanka and in India, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka' (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, p. 13).

The British Council and the Advent of Communicative Language Teaching in Bangladesh

By the late 1980s, Bangladeshis had begun to perceive that the steady decline in English language education because of nationalistic language policies was a bad thing for their nation. As a consequence, the demand for English grew exponentially from then on; even General Ershad reportedly sent his son to the American school in Dhaka. Parents who could afford it would be sending their children to the mushrooming English-medium schools of the country then. One reason for this was that the country was increasingly connected to the international business world; also, Bangladeshis were going abroad for jobs in increasing numbers. Moreover, linguistic nationalism was losing steam steadily. By coincidence the major countries of the west were now embracing neoliberal policies as never before. The nature of aid was beginning to change since the idea of giving away a lot for nothing seemed to be unsustainable for donor countries who had converted to the mantra of free markets. The idea that nothing should be free and the desire that the donor should benefit from giving in financially tangible ways now dictated policies of most donor countries ever more than before.

The British Council, geared till then to pursue a policy in Bangladesh, as well as in other commonwealth countries, of promoting British culture in general, now began marketing the English language in particular in a manner that would help it sustain itself without straining the British budget. This was a policy that would prioritise English Language Teaching (ELT) as a global enterprise for the Council. In fact, it transformed itself almost overnight and became primarily a centre for offering English language courses and conducting IELTS tests and not, as it was till then, a place for housing plentiful books on English literature and history and a centre for promoting British culture. Previously, the Council was the conduit through which the best students of the country would be given scholarships to study literature and humanities in Britain; now it became the place for recruiting potential ELT scholars and training them in the country so that they could serve British universities, which were strapped for cash and had been forced to generate their own revenue through courses that would attract overseas students as well as help in the task of exporting the English language. The idea, in other words, was that the British Council would make itself less of a burden on the British economy and more of a self-sustaining, income-generating unit for itself and the nation as a whole.

In his excellent study of the subject in *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson (1992) quotes from the annual report of the British Council for 1983–1984 on how it could benefit through the English language to promote British interests. Here is a summary offered by the British Council Chairman on the prospects ahead for the Council, as quoted by Phillipson:

> Of course we do not have the power we once had to impose our will but Britain's influence endures, out of all proportion to her economic and military resources. This is partly because the English language is the lingua franca of science, technology, and commerce; the demand for it is insatiable and we respond whether through the education systems of 'host' countries,

> or where the market can stand it, on a commercial basis. Our language is our greatest asset, greater than North Sea Oil, and the supply is inexhaustible; furthermore, while we do not have a monopoly, our particular brand remains highly sought after. I am glad to say those who guide the fortunes of this country share my conviction in the need to invest in, and exploit to the full, this invisible, God-given asset. (Phillipson, 1992, pp. 144–145)

The implication of this extract from the British Council's Chairman is clear: the Council would now be adopting a business agenda in which the English language would play a crucial part. And in the coming decades, the Council should be cashing in on the language, as – one can add in passing – were countries such as Australia, either through ELT services or, in the case of the USA, TESOL ones. Phillipson notes in his book on the comprehensive and far-reaching nature of the kind of linguistic imperialism the British Council would be engaging in. As Brown (1994), an American reviewer of Phillipson's book, sums up the neo-imperial venture in its fullness, 'the center provides the teachers, decides what is worthy of being taught… and collects data, which is then analyzed in Center universities, produced as a final product (e.g. a book, journal) and referred back for consumption in the Periphery' (p. 423).

In short, the new strategy for the British Council would involve reducing funding of arts and humanities programmes and more and more aggressive marketing of English through ELT programmes. As I put it (somewhat facetiously) many years ago in a piece that I had contributed to our leading English newspaper, *The Daily Star*, the Council had become the New East India Company of our times in some respects, 'making money any which way' it was able to but mainly through 'selling the English language globally' (Alam, 2003). I went on in my piece to declare that, '…the Council was now more bent on offering exorbitantly-priced language courses' and 'offering' all sorts of examination services, 'trading on its Englishness and cashing in on the dismal state of our educational system set back by the excesses of linguistic nationalism' (ibid).

I wrote the words quoted above in 2003 without carrying out any kind of research on the English language teaching apparatuses being promoted by neoliberal ideologically inflicted institutions, British Council-funded ELT scholarships, teacher training programmes in Bangladesh and curriculum innovations through which communicative language teaching (CLT) would be promoted in the country. However, I had already begun thinking about the subject as I prepared to write a paper for a conference in Japan that I attended in July 2002. The advent of CLT in Bangladesh, it would now became clear to me, was at the expense of the pedagogy in place in Bangladesh at this time, which I discovered on reading the relevant literature, was the Grammar Translation Method (GTM).[5] Within a few years, GTM was all but discredited, and all the ills of English language teaching attributed partly to it and not the language policies adopted by successive governments influenced by linguistic nationalism. In my observation, it was in quick time that whatever English teaching infrastructure remained in postliberation Bangladesh was either downsized

[5] It needs to be noted, though, that there is considerable variation within each of these language teaching approaches; however, for the sake of simplicity, I will not be referring to these.

or discredited by language experts flown in by the Council and ELT degree-holding graduates of British universities who were given the responsibility of rewriting textbooks and training teachers for schools and colleges throughout the country.

One area that apparently needed urgent attention according to the ELT 'experts' touting CLT was the use of literary pieces in English language primers; apparently, these pieces were neither topical nor easily accessible for learners. As I pointed out in my paper, 'Using Postcolonial Literature in ELT' (2002), nobody ditching these pieces and promoting CLT textbooks paid any attention to the fact that for generations, English language learners of the subcontinent had been learning English competently even in remote school districts through GTM methods.[6] One problem, as I suggested in my paper, was that GTM 'worked at a time when people were using English for public correspondence and were reading English voluntarily and spontaneously' (Alam, 2002, p. 124). The pedagogy had also been attuned to the method; teachers learned to use GTM texts easily enough because they had themselves learned English that way and because it was easy for them to be trained in the method.

In a changed linguistic environment where English was not used in the public sphere and taught only cursorily in schools and colleges, the teaching and learning of English was bound to suffer, no matter what method was introduced to teachers in any quick-fix strategy. This was the main reason that CLT would make things even worse in Bangladesh after the textbooks and pedagogy that were moulded by it began to enter public school classrooms. Not only were these textbooks thin in content and bland in tone, they were being taught almost entirely by teachers who had not been trained in CLT at all or trained superficially through crash courses. Moreover, these teachers would be conducting classes in situations where students had no opportunities to *communicate* verbally outside the classroom and limited opportunities to do so inside it. Class sizes too had swelled by the 1990s, and so how could one use CLT methods to packed classrooms where group work was constrained by the infrastructure as well the number of students?

In my paper on the use of postcolonial literature in ELT (Alam, 2002), I had also focused on the way the ELT 'experts' and their Bangladeshi counterparts with their strident denunciation of GTM had ignored not only the tradition of English teaching and the use of literary pieces in English primers in the Indian subcontinent that had evolved over almost 200 years but also the not insubstantial research that argued for the use of literature texts in the language classroom as important and effective.[7] The new CLT-inspired textbooks were thin in content and unimaginative in their presentation. As I pointed out in my paper, the passages composed for the exercises of the book were also short in length. As a consequence, users of the book could not

[6] It can be pointed out here that the pedagogy in place in West Bengal in this period did not change overnight; Bengalis there still continued to learn English in ways that did not discredit the use of literary pieces for their students.

[7] See, for instance, the essays collected in C. J. Brumfit and R. A. Carter's collection of essays, *Literature and Language Teaching* (1986), particularly the contributions by the editors, Michael Long, William T. Littlewood, Braj B. Kachru and Sandra McKay.

be introduced to 'structure, transitions, and/or the way an argument is developed fully and certainly not on text types' (Alam, 2002, p. 131). Moreover, the passages, designed to be 'authentic' and not foreign, as was the case with the literary pieces used in the GTM text books, appeared to be 'almost entirely informational in approach and hardly fascinating' (Alam, 2002, p. 131).

In 'Using Postcolonial Literature in ELT', I had argued for the use of postcolonial writing in English – works by authors such as the pioneering Bengali Muslim feminist writer Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Bangladeshi creative writer Khademul Islam or the Bangladeshi English language poet Kaiser Haq – if attractive as well as 'authentic' texts were needed, instead of texts that had the kind of agenda that 'development' experts flown in from abroad promote but are in effect insipid, bite-sized and have the feel of plastic. As far as I could see, a textbook like the 2001 *English for Today* produced by Bangladeshi ELT 'experts' who had been chaperoned by British ones represented 'an opportunity wasted' and embodied 'a new kind of linguistic imperialism' (Alam, 2002, p. 135) where British globalising interests were served instead of Bangladeshi ones and educational aid offered, not untypically (and unsurprisingly) of such aid packages, in self-serving ways.

It should be no surprise then that in the years that followed, the imposition of these ELT-inspired textbooks and what I do not think absolutely unfair to label as fly-by-night schemes was the further worsening of the English language learning-teaching situation in Bangladesh. Not only were these books slight in content and unattractive reads, they were also not the kind of matter that could deliver results, especially when in the hands of teachers who had little or no training or knowledge of, or interest in, ELT pedagogy. There were few opportunities for the bulk of teachers to be trained in ELT methods, and the fact that students would concentrate on memorising the bite-sized passages for their terminal examinations would mean that they would graduate with even less knowledge of English than students of the previous generation who had been taught according to GTM pedagogy.

Globalisation and the Commodification of English Studies in Bangladesh

Further complicating the situation were globalisation and the concomitant increase in the commodification of higher education in general, and for the purposes of this paper, of English Studies in particular, from the 1990s onward. As I have suggested above, ELT and its brainchild CLT were products designed primarily for the global marketplace by British language specialists and were exported aggressively everywhere by the British Council to fulfil a particular agenda. As I also indicated, by the 1990s a few universities in other English-speaking places would also be getting into the act. Traditional English studies and the teaching of humanities in general took the backseat in many universities worldwide as their English departments began prioritising revenue-generating modules and packages instead of

nourishing any pedagogy that their administrators felt did not lead to directly employable skills. One remembers Cardinal Newman's great treatise on the idea of a university for being so denigrated scant at this time – globalising and neoliberal economics would mean that 'the idea of a university' from now on would often mean institutions had to make money or at least not lose too much of it. Liberal education was increasingly seen as not viable for the university; technical education was what counted since it was consumable through the worldwide net cast by such policies. Inevitably, English language teaching in Bangladesh became affected even more adversely than it had been by the turn of the last century because of policies adopted by this time to get English studies ready for the marketplace.

Indeed, the pedagogic situation became quite problematic for the humanities all over the world as the commodification of university education began paralleling globalising/neo-colonial schemes in English language teaching. In the new millennium, leading progressive intellectuals such as Chomsky and Eagleton would be drawing the world's attention to the manner in which the idea of a university was becoming seriously compromised everywhere. In a speech given at the University of Toronto, Scarborough, on April 6, 2011, under the rubric, 'Academic Freedom and the Corporatization of Universities', Chomsky pointed out forcefully how in California, a state that once had the best public university system in the world, university education was being 'reduced to technical training or something like that'; 'privatisation', he stressed, was now being offered as the ultimate panacea even in higher education. He insists, however, such privatisation was designed only for 'the rich'. He finds it to be only a 'lower level of technical training for the rest' (Chomsky, 2011).

In his acerbic and acutely written paper titled 'The Slow Death of the University', published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on April 6, 2015, Eagleton reinforced Chomsky's point in his own characteristically witty manner with particular reference to English departments. While commenting on 'the destruction of subjects such as English' and the manner in which English teaching was being pushed into a corner by 'the hard-face priorities of global capitalism', he declared facetiously, and not a little pessimistically, that at this rate, 'if English departments survive at all, it may simply be to teach business students the use of the semicolon…' The conclusion he comes to is a sobering and timely one. To quote him, while 'education should indeed be responsive to the needs of society', this was not the same thing 'as regarding yourself as a service station for neo-capitalism' (Eagleton, 2015).

In Bangladesh, too, the demand for university education serving the maws not only of the government but also of the business world as never before found new impetus in the 1990s as the country's economy began to flourish and as multinationals began entering its markets. Also, more and more Bangladeshis were looking for jobs outside then, necessitating English language skills for many of them. The consequences for Bangladeshi tertiary education were manifold. Firstly, the 1990s saw the advent of many new universities in Bangladesh, some private and others public (see Kabir & Webb, Chap. 15, this volume). Quite a few of these hastily created universities, for their part, were bent on offering English language

programmes at lower levels that would mostly service business and computer science graduates. Secondly, a number of the private universities would from now on concentrate on teaching ELT-induced courses to produce teachers who could teach the English language according to the CLT formula and in the quickest possible ways to their students. Thirdly, there would be an exponential rise in demand for public education at lower levels that would lead to 'multiple-choice' admission tests in English in public universities and 'vote-bank'-oriented terminal examinations in the language for school and college students. All of these developments would further affect the teaching and learning of English adversely.

To take the case of the expansion of private and public universities first, because of the government of Bangladesh's decision to expand tertiary education in manifold sites for the expanding economy as well as the international job market, English Studies would soon be offered in far too many colleges and universities that would be springing up overnight. To take the most egregious instance first, although the National University of Bangladesh was founded in 1992, it would soon have thousands and thousands of students graduating from its affiliated colleges with English degree. For example, 196 of its colleges would be offering B.A. (Hons.) degrees and 137 M. A. degrees in English by 2014. In a parallel development, by 2014, around 40 public and 80 private universities would be set up in the country. Most of these had been hastily set up in the 1990s and the first decade of the new century; almost all of them began offering English B. A. (Hons) and M. A. courses immediately.

However, that the affiliated colleges of National University and the bulk of the public and the private universities were churning out poorly taught students through their English departments did not seem to deter either their teachers or the students, let alone their administrators; what mattered most in all cases was satisfying the perceived demand for more and more graduates for Bangladesh's increasingly robust economy as well as the world outside. That the graduates of such institutions would more often than not end up with jobs as teachers in primary and secondary educational institutions would make the English language learning and teaching situation deteriorate sharply by the turn of the millennium; things would only get worse afterwards.

As for the English language pedagogy preferred by private universities, the lead would be given by North South University, the first private university of the country, which initially decided that it could best serve its students by offering them ELT-inspired introductory courses. In 'The Commodification of English Studies in Bangladesh' (Alam, 2011), I point out the way such universities concentrated on downsizing traditional English teaching to prioritise ELT-induced modules. One university thus had an undergraduate programme in which there were 'Four basic writing courses, 10 slightly more advanced courses on reading, speaking and writing skills, one course on the history of English, over 20 ELT courses on subjects such as Stylistics, Morphology, Phonetics, etc. and only 6 literature courses' (Alam, 2011, p. 206). I also cite the example of another university that was offering courses called 'Call-Centre English' and 'Airline English' (ibid). In other words, these private universities were trying to cash in on the perceived need for graduates who would meet the demand for English-speaking graduates in the local and even the global market-

places, although they had a dearth of teachers trained to teach such courses or the infrastructure needed to sustain them.

Ironically, the lack of qualified teachers combined with such narrow range of courses worked to produce students who would be quite restricted in their ability to use the language outside the rudimentary 'communicative' mode emphasised in this kind of pedagogy. As in the case of the National University graduates, those from the private universities would also be entering the job market by the turn of the millennium and in the process would be contributing to the worsening of the overall English language teaching situation across the nation.

By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, it was quite clear to astute observers that the intervention of ELT-induced English language teaching coupled with the expansion of English courses being taught in Bangladeshi universities according to CLT modules had not made things any better and that the deterioration in English learning-teaching that had begun with linguistic nationalism was continuing. In 'Will CLT Bail out the Bogged Down ELT in Bangladesh', Hamid and Baldauf (2008) face the question empirically. Reviewing government policies, the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP Bangladesh) that was the result of a DFID-funded scheme and the ensuing textbooks introduced in schools, they conclude that the introduction of CLT did not make a difference; classroom teaching remained the same in rural areas they had chosen for their project because the teachers there had received little or no training in teaching in ELT ways. Although the authors do not take into consideration either the quality of the ELT modules offered in universities or the quantitative expansion in English Studies programmes at the National University's affiliated colleges and in private universities offering degrees for men and women who would become school and college teachers throughout the country, their observations suggest that nothing had changed in the English language teaching situation because of such developments. To quote them, 'no studies in the last decade have reported any improvement in the standard of teaching and learning in Bangladesh, as might have been anticipated by the 1990s policy interventions' (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008, p. 20). They even go on to conclude: 'the mission assigned to CLT in the context of ELTIP Bangladesh was both unreasonable and unattainable' (p. 22).

'Between the Idea and Reality… Falls the Shadow': CLT in Theory and Practice in Bangladesh

CLT, then, has not helped in any perceivable way in improving the English language teaching-learning situation in Bangladesh. Indeed, it might have made matters worse by replacing an age-old method that had been working reasonably well till language policies changed in the nascent state. It is quite clear by now that the once dominant language teaching method – much vilified in ELT circles as 'the Grammar Translation Method' – was changed after the birth of Bangladesh too peremptorily

to something which proved to be unsuitable for Bangladesh, given the ground realities of school and college classrooms, the textbook production and the fact that the bulk of students come from rural areas where they have little or no exposure to the English language in its spoken form.

This is not to say CLT innovations in English language and learning have nothing to offer to those wanting to innovate and transform the way people learn English in countries where it is a second or a foreign language; the point being argued here is that its implementation in Bangladesh has been problematic for all kinds of reasons. As the jargon has it, in the context of Bangladesh, the conception and execution of ELT policies have been associated with all the encumbrances of all 'top-down' approaches to fixing urgently a crisis situation; local realities translated into disastrous practice what had seemed ideal in theory to distantly located UK Department for International Development (DFID) officials in charge of programmes such as the English Language Teaching Improvement (ELTIP) introduced in 1997 and British Council strategies to sell Englishness[8] to benefit British language programmes. Not only was the pedagogy almost flown in overnight by 'native-speaking' ELT experts (funded by limited DFID budgets) who had little clue to the difficulties of implementing it and inadequate understanding of the teaching-learning situation in Bangladesh, some 'native' teachers were flown out in batches to study in the UK (also on limited DFID budgets) to become either weak or self-serving local agents – and, in some cases, 'native informants' – of the new pedagogy. Quite often, all the knowledge these teachers obtained was picked up from short courses and diploma programmes that they attended. Attempts might have been made to organise workshops in Bangladesh through these teachers as well as the flown-in 'experts' and local 'consultants', but such efforts were few and quite inadequate, given, on one hand, the funding and the effort put in and the hidden agendas associated with neoliberal policies and, on the other, the extent of the problem. Certainly, only a small percentage of the teachers employed in schools and colleges across the length and breadth of the country who would be teaching the new textbooks had access to such training. And as I have indicated above and elsewhere, the textbooks, at least judging by the one I scrutinised in writing 'Using Postcolonial Literature in ELT' (Alam, 2002), were not up to the mark.

By the first decade of the new millennium, even Bangladeshi ELT 'practitioners' and pedagogues were beginning to realise that what they had learnt and were trying to propagate through their pedagogy and textbooks were simply not working in classroom situations. The evidence was coming to them through empirical surveys that they now began conducting. In the very tellingly titled piece, 'Policy Versus Ground Reality: Secondary English Language Assessment System in Bangladesh', authored by Das et al. in the June 2014 issue of *The Curriculum Journal*, we can find some sobering conclusions drawn from a fairly extensive empirical survey she and her fellow authors had carried out in 38 schools spread out across Bangladesh. They had asked 38 English teachers and 228 students of 8 *upazillas* (sub-districts)

[8] See Roland Barthes' classic essay 'The Rhetoric of the Image' and the discussion of 'Italianicity' in it.

to respond to their main concern: 'To what extent is the secondary English assessment system in Bangladesh aligned with the curriculum?' (Das, Shaheen, Shrestha, Rahman, & Khan, 2014, p. 7). The answers and the conclusion drawn by the research team make for compelling reading for anyone interested in the future of English language teaching and not merely ELT in Bangladesh.

Das and her fellow authors note quite sensibly at the beginning of their paper that 'any policy reform is most effective when it is planned and implemented "holistically"' (Das et al., 2014, p. 2), implying thereby that this was not the case in Bangladesh. Indeed, their survey reveals that far from 'communicating' in English in classrooms, students were being made to concentrate only on two of the four 'skills', for there was limited or no scope for listening and speaking in the classroom; school space and examinations were being used by almost all teachers and students to primarily test only reading and writing abilities. Also, most teachers had little knowledge of the CLT methodology itself. One may also add that even with the knowledge, large class sizes and examination-oriented academic calendars would have made applying it extremely difficult, if not impossible. As the authors put it on the basis of their own survey as well as other studies that they had consulted, 'ELT reform does not necessarily lead to positive changes in English language assessment or such changes may not be compatible with the intended outcome of the ELT reform' (Das et al., 2014, p. 9).

Khan, one of the five authors of 'Policy Versus Ground Reality: Secondary English Language Assessment System in Bangladesh', had earlier carried out a fairly detailed survey of the way students were being tested in Bangladesh after the advent of the ELT textbooks and the imposition of the CLT methodology by teachers across the country. Khan's survey is based on comments made by some teachers/examiners. She notes that by 2008, the situation had become so problematic that another donor-funded project called the Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project (SEQAEP) was initiated across 121 *upazillas* since school examinations and Secondary School Certificate Examinations (SSC) and 'had indicated that English Language is one of the weakest subject areas at the secondary level' (Khan, 2010, p. 123). She thus targeted SSC and Higher Secondary (HSC) tests for her study and formulated questions to a select group of teachers/examiners to find out their 'views… regarding the current status of assessment at the secondary and higher secondary level' (p. 130). The results showed what was all too obvious to anyone with any knowledge of these tests: they did not examine speaking and hearing at all and concentrated on reading and writing. Moreover, most of the teachers surveyed revealed that they still prioritised grammar when marking. They also noted that they had not been trained otherwise. A few expressed their concerns about how the tests were contributing to very high pass rates and at times went against the better students. Many noted that the format encouraged rote learning, promoted the practice of memorising stock questions and induced the practice of 'giving suggestions' and relying on the pool of past questions. They observed as well that it was giving rise to a learning culture prioritising guidebooks, private tutors and coaching centres for those fortune-favoured students who could afford these routes out of the problematic situation.

Khan's paper even notes that a teacher pointed to a 'crisis' situation obtaining after the advent of the ELT curriculum' and emphasised that 'ways out' of it had to be found (Khan, 2010, p. 136). It is interesting to note that one teacher suggested that translation be introduced in the curriculum (it had been thrown out as a particularly offensive and retrogressive component of GTM). Khan underscores the point to be observed, 'theoretically these texts reflect a communicative syllabus but in practical terms they are not fully communicative' (p. 143). She reports that some teachers felt that even 'the writing tasks do not appear to be communicative' (p. 147). The net result is what Khan characterises as 'a most common and often repeated complaint from educators, researchers and policy makers': even after 12 years of studying English (I would like to interject here the words 'supposedly under the umbrella of ELT/CLT et al!'), 'Students in Bangladesh cannot speak or write English correctly' (p. 147).[9]

In 'Policy Versus Ground Reality', Das, Khan and their fellow researchers observe how CLT pedagogy had proved to be problematic in countries such as China, Korea and Libya because of the gap between the intentions of those who would want a change to ELT-inspired and ELT-induced English teaching and learning and the ground reality of want of access to the right kind of teacher or the lack of the appropriate learning ambience. They note tellingly that where such pedagogy succeeded, as it appeared to have done in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, it did so because the project followed a 'cascade training model in which local contexts and project partners' previous experience' are taken into account (Das et al., 2014, p. 3). This to me is a crucial point since in Bangladesh the imposition of CLT was done without taking into account the more than 200 years of experience accumulated in English language teaching, merely because it seemed to CLT gurus on call then that such experience was based on GTM and did not appear to take advantage of ELT methodology. The authors of the paper also note that local teachers were not consulted when a new 'language assessment policy' was adopted (p. 4). I would like to add that they were not consulted at all in other ways too. Like Khan did in her paper, they note too how speaking and listening were scant in tests, final examinations deemed all-important, memorisation encouraged, cognisance ignored and tuition at home or in coaching centres and guidebooks/notebooks considered crucial for good results by those who could afford them.

Nevertheless, the authors conclude their piece with the hope that creation of a 'favorable classroom environment for implementing a communicative approach to teaching' could still lead to qualitative changes in the English language learning-teaching situation through the application of ELT methodology (Das et al., 2014, p. 16). Such optimum conditions may still be created, but as I will try to suggest in the concluding section of my paper, much more will have to be done than that to

[9] While Khan's work has been thorough, I feel that because it is restricted to data collected from a limited number of participants who are, moreover, only 'from prestigious schools in Dhaka city', (Khan, p. 130) it does not reflect the far more dismal situation that exists not only in assessment but also the application of CLT-inspired methodology in the rest of the country, especially its rural areas.

reverse the kind of disastrous situation reflected in the dismal performance recorded after the University of Dhaka Admission Test's Advanced English test which I discussed earlier and which I see as the unavoidable outcome of the imposition of an enervated version of CLT in Bangladesh. Not only had these students not mastered speaking and listening after 12 years of ELT-inspired textbooks and application of ELT methods, they had also not been taught to read or write competently in the language, although CLT was supposed to teach them all four skills, unlike the much-criticised GTM approach to English teaching and learning, which had come under fire by the ELT experts for paying scant attention to two of them but which had produced generations of students with competence in reading and writing English before nationalism wreaked havoc on the English language in Bangladesh.

Conclusion: Revisioning English Teaching in Bangladesh

I would like to think, then, that the miserable state of English language and learning is the consequence, first, of years of neglect because of overzealous and excessively nationalistic language policies adopted by successive governments in the first two decades of Bangladesh's history. A by-product of the nationalistic approach to English was that a new generation of teachers would be recruited from the 1980s with skills that were no match for an earlier generation of teachers who had the benefit of generations of accumulated experience in English teaching through grammar-translation methods. The second major reason for the malaise in the English learning-teaching situation was the self-serving nature of British Council-induced 'solutions' to the crisis where ELT was privileged to favour British ELT pedagogy that now had to be imported from Britain or learnt in the country and so proved unaffordable in the end.

The third is linked to the second; the revamped British Council was only the avant-garde, so to speak, of neoliberal policies framed from the Reagan-Thatcher years that would impact on education in the ensuing age of relentless commodification and globalisation. Related to this cause was the unplanned expansion of education at all levels but especially the opening of endless English departments in colleges and universities that offered English courses taught by teachers who had little or no preparation for teaching it. Finally, I have tried to show how CLT, touted as the panacea to all problems by ELT theorists and experts, failed miserably when applied in Bangladesh, since its application was ill-conceived, partial, rushed and imposed by distant powers and their native informants, since neither the classroom teaching situation nor the testing method reflected CLT goals adequately and since it contemptuously discarded traditional ways of teaching English that had been tried and tested in the subcontinent for more than two centuries and that had evolved over time.

Everyone involved in English Studies – whether from what is now dubbed the 'literature stream' or from the language one – must surely be concerned at the malaise evident in the test results discussed earlier. Everyone thinking about improving the English language learning-teaching situation must surely revision the way we

must now deal with English in our part of the world. What, then, can be the way out? I offer below a number of suggestions, based on my decades of teaching experience in the country and learning experience acquired from stints in teaching undergraduates in Canada and the USA as well as my reflections on the issue over the years.[10]

First of all, positive features of the older methods employed in teaching English that teachers have known and enforced successfully for over two centuries must be identified and reinforced. To dismiss or ignore the earlier centuries of English education in the country entirely is too arrogant and irresponsible move. One of these positive features is the use of literary texts for learners. The use of such texts had succeeded noticeably in attracting learners in the past and had been seminal for what historians have labelled as the Bengal Literary Renaissance. As the (West) Bengali literary critic Jasodhara Bagchi (1977) pointed out in a book on Shakespeare's influence on Bengal in the nineteenth century, English literary classics were key to being the 'the harbinger of a secular outlook' (p. 150) as well as a means of freeing 'the colonial psyche from the domination of mere "knowledge"'; indeed, they were what 'gave free range in the sphere of the imagination' (p. 152). For sure, the play of language in literary texts stimulated the thinkers and writers of the Bengali Literary Renaissance so that not only were they instrumental in the efflorescence of Bengali literature, but they also became immensely resourceful in using the English language for, among other things, clamouring for emancipation and claiming freedom from the foreign yoke. The British, as evident from Macaulay's famous Minute, had conceived of English as a way of making good colonial subjects, but the language in India had developed in such a way that it developed a trajectory of its own in the subcontinent and led to the empire writing back, as it were, and using English as a weapon in the campaign for political emancipation.

But of course literary passages should be introduced through a graded scheme so that they start appearing in textbooks in the final years of schooling and in HSC passages.[11] One way in which this can also be done is translation, a feature that was also a key to learning English in India for many generations. Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet and educator of Bengal, certainly felt that translation was an excellent way of developing English language learning skills. This was something he had divined from his own experience. Anyone who has studied any of the major biographies devoted to him knows that whenever traditional forms of teaching failed to attract the child Rabindranath, his tutor would set him tasks of translation. These often intrigued him so that he accomplished his task speedily. In the process he appeared to have embarked on a course that would not merely enable him to be proficient in the English language but also acquaint him with writers and genres that would impact on his imagination in powerful ways. Translation, his example thus suggests, can be a spur to the learner's imagination and a very effective way of

[10] This part of my paper depends extensively on an earlier one. This paper, titled 'English, the Language of Power, and the Power of Language', was published in *Harvest* (see below).

[11] In fact, this has already happened in the new English HSC course book, for the older English text, developed according to ELT principles and critiqued extensively – see my paper 'Using Postcolonial Literature in ELT' cited above as an example.

learning. No wonder, then, that for the students of the school that Tagore had set up in rural *Shantiniketan* – from which men as outstanding as the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen and the brilliant film director Satyajit Ray graduated – he made translation a central learning activity. It was for this reason too that he devised translation lessons for students learning the language in his school through primers such as *Anubad Charcha* in Bengali. This was a work that he later translated and reconceived as the English book titled *Selected Passages for Bengali Translation* in 1917.

Two related points can now be made in revisioning the teaching of English in Bangladesh for our time in the wake of the diminished capacity to teach the language effectively that appears to have set in after Bangladesh's independence. The first is that we must learn from best practices – whether it is GTM or CLT. The second is that we must make use of the kind of experience Tagore drew on in conceiving English lessons for his students to revamp the pedagogy instead of aping British ELT pedagogues coming to Bangladesh with quick-fix solutions and then departing the land after leaving a trail of linguistic devastation, so to speak, in their wake.

Here, however, it may be pointed out that there were English educators who, unlike the fly-by-night 'experts' that I castigated earlier, had come to the subcontinent and conducted research for quite a while before coming up with recommendations for language learning. A case in point is Dr. Michael West, an Englishman who had come to Dhaka in the 1920s to become Principal of the city's Teachers' Training College at the end of the decade. The research he did during his stay in Bengal led him to the conclusion that graded readers and wide-ranging reading exercises were the solution. The implication for us is that in a learning environment where students have little opportunity to read the language, they have to be exposed to a lot more reading than was given in the textbooks produced under the ELT dispensation in the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium. West implied that extensive reading was the key to moulding learners – how else would they learn the words, the idioms, and the unique syntax of a language? For certain, the bite-sized passages of the ELT textbooks I referred to above were never enough, as the test debacle proved to us in the English department a few years ago; and given the issues of the 2002 textbooks also discussed above, the current set of textbooks need to be thoroughly evaluated. To come back to West, it is the kind of work he had done on the subject that we can turn to in revisioning English teaching methods in Bangladesh.[12]

While I have been quite severe on ELT gurus and imported CLT methodology imposed weakly on Bangladeshis since the 1990s, it is time for me to declare that I feel that ELT itself is not to be blamed. As a literature teacher who was trained in teaching composition during his graduate teaching assistant years in two Canadian universities, I have always appreciated what I learnt about reading and writing from English Readers and Writing Handbooks as well as workshops and talks. I have also lamented the way we were taught English without receiving any kind of training in

[12] See the Richard Smith edited *Teaching English as a Foreign Language 1936–1961: Foundations of ELT* (London: Routledge, 2005) for more on West's pedagogy.

reading and writing skills as undergraduate students of the University of Dhaka. Because ELT researchers have over decades done solid work on teaching methodology and have focused in innumerable ways on classroom teaching, it would be foolish to ignore the many decades of accumulated experience as well as the expertise of ELT practitioners in this respect. The kind of empirical research on language teaching they have carried out diligently has surely a lot to offer anyone thinking about revisioning English Studies in Bangladesh at this time.

However what I am certain is that we need to make use of such research and expertise from our location and with a postcolonial sensibility. After all, we are all involved in teaching a language that has been deeply involved in British imperialism's expansionist mode and that is still very much a conduit of globalisation's imperial encroachments. We need, in other words, to develop a critical pedagogy based on critiques of any package solutions imposed from above or from donors who have their interests more in mind than our own ones. We need, in effect, a postcolonial pedagogy where language education can benefit from critical theory as well as the reading of postcolonial writing, something I feel is sadly lacking in the ELT practitioners I come across regularly in our country. And yet since Edward Said, many teachers of English have felt that they should teach the English language with an awareness and sensitivity derived from their location that would allow them to interrogate structures that may be imposed on them as one more attempt to hegemonise them with apparatuses at the service of capital/power. Our students must be trained, therefore, to do critical discourse analysis and be conscious of discourses of power that affect language acquisition and usage, although of course, logistic realities such as big classes, inadequate resources and poor teacher training will make this task difficult to achieve.

One way of developing an English language pedagogy suited to our needs and avoid overreliance on Western ones is not only to learn from the history of English education in Bengal but also to benefit from the English language policy programmes in a country like India. My frequent visits to some parts of India tell me that the country has done reasonably well in developing and refining GTM methods to suit the needs of the age. Indian graduates from schools using 'traditional' methods and examination systems fare reasonably well in professional life and are able to use the language effectively because of the English language learning culture that has evolved there over time. Unlike India though, Bangladesh is a monolingual country, and despite the shared legacy of colonialism, post-independence experiences and the economic realities of these two countries are certainly different, therefore, as well as cross-country studies, more research is needed at the national level.

There are other ways too that must be explored in revamping English language learning and teaching in Bangladesh. Why do we not also learn from the textbooks and teaching methods deployed by English-medium schools of Dhaka and Chittagong who are graduating students who seem to be doing so well in 'O' level examinations and IELTS and TOEFL tests? Why must we ignore Bengali while teaching English in the classroom and why should we not teach grammar to our students so that they know the differences between Bengali and English grammars that affect their acquisition of English?

Ultimately, we must learn from our past mistakes and from the history of English language teaching in the country; keep track of best practices and the latest research in English language pedagogy, not only in the West but also in our neighbouring countries; and come up with plans for English Studies that will work, given the circumstances in which we learn and teach. We must, of course, revision English for our time and come up with a curriculum suited to our needs. The time to do so, of course, is now. The 2014 University of Dhaka test results tell us that the bell tolls for us English language teachers here and now.

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