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## Learning English at the B.Sc. Engineering Level in Some Universities of Bangladesh

Forhad Jamila, M.A.

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### Abstract

This article explores the condition of learning English to the engineering students in some of the universities of Bangladesh. An evaluation of course curricula of English is carried on the basis of the English syllabuses for engineering disciplines of those universities. Discussion on importance of learning English for an engineer, failure of learning English by the engineering students has been included in this paper. A brief review of research efforts aimed at evaluating this construct is made, followed by a consideration of how the language may be more effectively learned. This paper describes the various aspects of learning English and focuses on the effective ways of learning and teaching English at this level.

### Introduction

English offers the dimensions that lead a learner to make him efficient and skilled to compete in the competitive world. For that, English courses are offered to the students of different disciplines of B.Sc Engineering. In this paper, I offer a comparative study of the courses of English at the B.Sc. engineering level for different disciplines in five public technical universities in Bangladesh: Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology, Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka University of Engineering and Technology, and Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology. Some information from some private universities is also discussed.

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This article focuses on the necessity of learning English for the technical students. Problems faced by the students and their failure in learning English adequately are discussed here. After Murshikul Alam's (2006) article, "English Language Syllabus at BUET: An Evaluation" which discusses the course curricula of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), to the best of my knowledge, no article has been reported on the issue facing students in learning English, as I do in this study.

### **Why do Engineers Need to Learn English?**

At present English is the *de facto* official language of the world. English is used as the language of global communication. A person skilled in English is in good demand for employment in the world. Larsen-Freeman (1991) writes:

English, a second language for most of the people of the world, has increasingly become the international language for business and commerce, science and technology, and international relation and diplomacy. Other professional intercourse, such as the proceeding of meetings of health practitioners or educators from different parts of the world, is often conducted in English, a second language for many of the participants. (p. 1)

The engineers who graduate from the universities mentioned above usually lack proficiency in English. Generally speaking, engineering graduates from neighboring countries like India and Sri Lanka have better command in English than graduates from Bangladesh. It is true that Bangladesh engineers lag behind the engineers of India, Sri Lanka in the overseas job market because of inadequate proficiency in English. In Bangladesh, local and international companies recruit those engineers who are better skilled in English. There are also many Indian and Sri Lankan experts who work in local or international companies with good command in English. Now Bangladesh graduates need a realization that they will not be able to cope up with the competition unless more importance is given to learn English.

Nunan (2003) points out that English is the dominant medium of communication around the world. It is the language of business, technology, science, the Internet, popular entertainment and sports. In academia over 50% of all research is published in English.

English plays the vital role in our economic activities. In trading with foreign countries people need to communicate in English. The economy of Bangladesh depends to some extent on remittance by Bangladesh workers abroad, export of some items and foreign aid. Remittance is going to be the leading tool of our economy. The skilled manpower like engineers, technologists who are skilled in English can earn a good deal of foreign currency.

A graduate who wants to go for further study in a foreign country or wants to get a scholarship for studying abroad must be skilled in English. They need to sit for different English

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language tests. A good score is demanded in those tests for getting admission in renowned institutions and for getting scholarships.

### **Syllabuses of English for Engineering Disciplines of Some Universities**

The English courses for B.Sc. Engineering level are almost the same in every university of Bangladesh with a few exceptions. In designing the course contents, grammar and writing skill are emphasized. Grammar part contains mainly: Vocabulary, Construction of Sentences, Some Grammatical Problems, Analysis, and Transformation of Sentences and Synthesis of Sentences, Punctuation, Common Errors committed by Bangladesh students in Grammar, etc.

The writing part includes: Paragraph Writing, Amplification, Précis: Definition and Importance, Rules of Précis Writing, Commercial Correspondence, Format and Organization of Letter in general, Various Types of Letters: Letter of Application, Request Letter, Order Letter, Letter of Adjustment, Letter of Complaint, Tender Notice: Definition, Purpose, Types of Tender Notice, Common Forms of Technical Report: Writing for Technical Purposes, Various Elements of Report, Rules of Footnotes and Reference, Key Word Selection, Standard Form of Project Report, Term Paper, Thesis, Research Paper, etc.

In addition to the above, BUET syllabus includes short stories of some famous writers and models of business communication in advanced level of the English courses. Among the private universities, North South University emphasizes different sorts of essay writing, East West University and Stamford University have oriented their courses differently to improve oral and written communication skills. Most of the private universities in Bangladesh just follow the English syllabuses of BUET. Shahjalal University of Science and Technology has the course of English language practical to develop listening and speaking skills.

From the syllabus analysis of these courses, it is observed that the courses are designed on the basis age-old grammar-translation method. The students of this level have already completed their English courses in secondary and higher secondary levels in communicative method and here they are to learn advanced grammatical rules. So, there exists a yawning gap between their previous and present courses. There is little scope for speaking and listening as students' interaction and exposure to the target language is almost absent. In the view of Hutchinson and Waters (1984), language materials should aim at harnessing and enlarging underlying linguistic competence. Students are encouraged to aim for a global integration of the four skills as opposed to the kinds of English for Special Purpose Syllabus. They are encouraged to acquire effective writing skills and are thus given a powerful tool for learning and working in their subjects.

### **Students' Failure in Learning English**

The acquisition of first language is an instinctive process. But second language acquisition is not such a spontaneous process. Schuman (1978) points out the social and psychological factors that help or hamper Second Language Acquisition. In case of our learners

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it is found that social distance is an important factor which hinders the learning process. As we are socially distant from the native speakers of English, our learners do not get sufficient input exposure. So, outside the classroom they do not have any easy access to English. But, for learning a language, easy access to the target language is very essential. Even it is seen that the presence of a foreign student (though a non-native speaker) in classroom enhances the speaking context and the ability of the other students as they have to interact with him in English.

English is learned as a second language in Bangladesh. There is a concerted effort at learning to pass the examination. Though there is a dire need for learning English to meet the global demand, students are not able to apprehend this in their student life. They realize their deficiency when they graduate and join gainful work. They feel that they could have done better in learning English, because it becomes apparent to them at that time that those who have better skills in English are preferred in job situations. For mastering a second language hard work and more concentration must be required. But the students do not concentrate on this.

One of the major problems of learning English at the B.Sc. engineering level is that the students may come with a wrong notion that English is less important than their discipline related courses. As a result they do not give importance to learn English to get proficiency in it. The medium of instruction in this level is English. But English is rarely practiced in other courses while the content subjects are taught in the classroom. Even error in writing English in those courses are generally ignored, which is also another important factor for not improving their skills in English. Greater emphasis on the mastery of engineering content and lack of adequate importance given to the mastery of English go hand in hand. Teachers of engineering courses seem to assume that by actual experience in the jobs students choose after their graduation, their students would improve their English skills. While this may be true, unfortunately, better paying employment opportunities demand entry level effective performance in English.

Also there may be English teachers' failure to make the language learning interesting to the students. The course topics may not be interesting to the students, and the teachers may not also be fully and adequately acquainted with the course contents in English. The appropriate process of learning English is not clear to the both the parties involved in the process of learning-teaching English. The classroom environment may not be attractive to the students. Teachers may not be efficient enough to make the student practice the four skills.

### **Problems of Teaching as well as the Teaching Methodology in Classroom**

Academically speaking, teachers' competence in English at this level may need some better improvement. English language teaching is based on four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. But most of the teachers are neither well acquainted with nor well trained in those four skills very well. Again most of the universities do not provide enough logistic supports to the teachers to help their students to improve their performance in English.

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Teachers focus more on managing the class of students, teaching the day's lesson, and helping students learn the material, hoping that this would result in learning English. The teaching approaches and teacher rationales highlight the social and personal dimensions of classroom pedagogy. Prabhu (1992) has pointed out that a lesson is not merely a curricular event. There is no guarantee that the implementation of a particular method and / or the employment of instruments such as syllabus or textbook would help a lot. Learning is a social event and a forum for interaction on a personal level. In order for the social event to move forward smoothly, expected roles are taken up and routinized events are enacted. Thus, students learn, listen, and warm up while teachers help, check, and stimulate.

But the environment in the universities does not support these basic facts of teaching. It is also found that only one or two English language teachers are engaged in teaching students in the whole university. Here one teacher has to manage a large number of students. The class load for a teacher is generally high. So, there is less chance of teacher-student interaction. The teachers also teach the language with old traditional method where reading and writing are given more importance. But the other skills listening and speaking remain unpracticed due to either classroom facilities or teachers' inactiveness. There are not enough logistic supports, such as, multimedia, overhead projector, TV monitor, audio systems for the teachers to teach effectively. So the teachers have no other choice to take the resort of old traditional method.

Another crucial problem of the teachers is that they usually teach a heterogonous group of students who are psychologically distant from the target language. As it is a foreign language, the students are afraid of English from their childhood. With this same frame of mind they attend their classes at this level. So, it becomes a hard task for a language teacher to make the classes interesting.

There is a global demand for efficient and skilled persons in English. So, an efficient or skilled language teacher at this level does not continue his job as a teacher at this level for a long time as he has opportunity to build his career in well-paying jobs, or he may not enjoy teaching in universities with limited facilities and moves over to other institutions within or outside the country. So the students are deprived of getting trained under the leadership of experienced and talented teachers.

### **How do Students Improve Their Learning?**

For learning anything we must have some purpose. Generally our motivation speeds up our learning. In case of learning a language motivation is very important. Gardener and Lambert (1959) called the concept of identification of Mowrer (1950) as integrative motivation which refers to the wishes of the learners to be integrated to the target language group. It needs to be incorporated with the culture and society of target language group. In contrast to the integrative motivation Gardener and Lambert (1959) introduced the concept of instrumental motivation, in which the learner is motivated to learn a language for utilitarian purposes, such as furthering a career, improving social status or meeting an educational requirement. Teachers should motivate their students through instrumental motivation. Alpetkin (1981) admonishes the language

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teachers to be sensitive to the motivation type of their students. Some teachers may operate under the questionable assumption that students' integrative motivation brings better result than instrumental motivation. Teachers should be discouraged from such practice.

Attitude is another important factor that influences learning English. A positive attitude towards the target language is related to the success of language learning. Teachers' attitude towards learners, also affects the quality and quantity of learning which take place. Spolsky (1969) has mentioned:

In a typical language learning situation, there are a number of people whose attitudes to each other can be significant: the learner, the teacher, the learner's peers and parents and the speakers of the language. Each relationship might well be shown to be a factor controlling the learner's motivation to acquire the knowledge. (p: 237)

Awareness and the will of learners are other crucial factors to learn a second language. Gattengo (1976) gave importance to the development of learner awareness and use of will to acquire second language successfully. There should be awareness among parents as well as teachers.

Having interest in any sort of work presented to a student makes that student more knowledgeable about the task. In the case of learning language, interest in the process plays an important role. Henning (1983) has studied that it is the interest of language learner that leads to successful language learning.

### **Suggestion to Improve English Language Learning and Teaching in Bangladesh**

The English studied at this level is the combination of a large portion of old traditional method and a small portion of communicative method. Giving more importance to grammatical rules enables learners to acquire more accuracy but not much fluency and spontaneity in using the language successfully. The general learners learn English for practical purposes like getting job, operating all kinds of individual, organizational and state affairs more effectively. Under these circumstances, giving exclusive importance communicative skills may mean mostly oral communication. But oral communication alone may not be enough. Written communication is also not less important and it should also be achieved. Accuracy may also be earned. In this method structure and grammar are taught from the context. Teachers need to work a lot for this kind of teaching as they have to innovate the ways to find out grammar patterns and use the structure hidden in the context.

Oral communication of our students can be developed through some controlled and created practice and situation. As we do not have English atmosphere to practice English everywhere, a controlled situation should be created in our classroom to be skilled in it.

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With the severe limitation of classroom facilities mentioned earlier it is really impossible to teach using the communicative method. The communicative skills will not develop in the students unless enough scope is provided to them for their practice outside the classroom or in the language lab. The number of students in a classroom will have to be also drastically reduced. But this may be only a wishful thinking, as existing circumstances and government educational plans focus on encouraging students of various social and economic backgrounds to gain higher education. And this certainly is an important social purpose.

A skilled and well trained teacher with a wide repertoire is optimal for teaching language. Hence, teacher education program is necessary for a potential teaching. Wanden (1985) stresses that teacher should not take teaching language a simple process. Instead, teachers' endeavor to help learners improve their language skills must be complemented by an equally systematic approach to helping them develop and refine their learning skills. Teachers should be well trained as learner's learning is integrated with skilled teaching.

The course contents of this level need to be redesigned. Literature also helps to learn English because it is through literature that one can know the nuances and subtleties of language. For this, some well-known classics and fictions may be included in the English courses. Students who intend to go abroad after their graduation require facing some sort of English language tests like IELTS, GRE and TOEFL, etc. The English courses may be designed by including the format of these tests to help the learners improve their skills in English. In course design there may be separate marking on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

A language lab with computers, video and TV monitors, audio facilities must be set up. Without a language lab practice of communicative English cannot be performed. One or two teachers will not be able to conduct a language lab smoothly. For this, a couple of language teachers need to be recruited.

## **Conclusion**

Concentrated effort and hard work are essential to learn English. Interest, awareness, and motivation are necessary for the acquisition of English. Successful learning also depends on the quality of teaching and the amount of exposure to the target language. That is, learners must be much more exposed to the target language in classroom and even outside the classroom. This paper discussed the nature and condition of learning English at the B.Sc. Engineering level in Bangladesh. Problems of learning and teaching methodology have been reported in this article. Finally, some suggestions have been given to overcome all those problems. It is hoped that this paper will help to improve the learning and teaching English at this level.

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