

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**

**Volume 11 : 12 December 2011**

**ISSN 1930-2940**

**Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.**

**Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.**

**Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.**

**B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.**

**A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.**

**Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.**

**Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.**

**S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.**

**G. Baskaran, Ph.D.**

**L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.**

## **A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts**

**Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English**

=====

### **Abstract**

The status of language is a critical issue in many states. Language policy is one method by which governments attempt to manage any critical situation that comes from languages and its status.

The aim of the article is to look at some of the existing problems regarding language policy in Bangladesh.

In this paper, the qualitative method is used by following document analysis. Data has been analyzed on the basis of various articles, books about language policies and language policies of different countries. At the same time, this article compares these data on the basis of Bangladesh contexts. It is found that Bangladesh needs a pragmatic language policy if it wants to think its socio-political, socio-economic and socio-cultural situations and to develop its nation by challenging all obstacles of development as well as to face the globalization.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

From the result of data analysis, it has been proved that the task is difficult because Bangladesh has no language policy. The intention of this article is to discuss these issues which are necessary for a pragmatic language policy in relation to English in Bangladesh.

## **Introduction**

Language plays a vital role in a society because it is not only a mode of communication but also a way of life. It carries historical, cultural, religious as well as ethnic markers of a people. For this reason, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Social Organization (UNESCO) declared February 21 as the International Mother Language Day. The organization also stated that languages are the most powerful instruments for preserving and developing tangible and intangible heritages (Mohsin, 2003).

So, the link between language and national identity is important for building a nation and a pragmatic language policy helps to make this unique unity. Ironically, the government of Bangladesh plays a very hegemonic and short-sighted role in its language policy. However, Bangladesh is gradually moving towards the fulfillment of the millennium development Goals (MDG). As a developing country, some international organizations and United Nations (UN) play an effective role in developing the socio-economic conditions of Bangladesh. For this reason, as an international language, English plays a significant role in the development process of Bangladesh. Thus, Hosssain and Tollefson (2006) conclude, “Within the context of severe social, economic, and educational problems, English remains a language of education and employment, though English language education is accessible to only a small elite, and most residents, particularly in rural areas, have no practical opportunity to develop significant English language skills”(p.242). So, English plays crucial roles in socio-political and economic issues in Bangladesh.

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has never had a consistent policy on language. Bangla has been used as a medium of instruction, while largely ignoring language issues facing a range of ethno- linguistic minorities in the country. Thus, within the context of complexities, Bangladesh needs to think its language policy in relation to English. For this reason, the aim of this article is to look at some the existing problems regarding a pragmatic language policy in Bangladesh. To achieve this goal, this article focuses on some issues on language policy in relation to English in Bangladesh.

## **The role of Bangla language**

Bangla is the most widely used language in Bangladesh. There are 100 million people who speak of Bangla while the total population is 130 million. Although Bangla

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

plays a central role in most institutions in Bangladesh, in reality other languages also are central to life in rural areas. According to the census of 1991, 60 language varieties are spoken in Bangladesh (Humayun, 2003). Hossain and Tollefson (2006) point out “Of these, 13 languages are spoken by ethnic minorities in the hill regions of the country” (p.243). However, although English is an important language of government, education, and the media, it is used by only about 3% of the population. Almost all of them live in the capital in Dhaka, and other urban areas (Baumgardner, 1992).

We know that Bangladesh means the land of Bengali people. In June 1947, the British Government divided greater India into two parts on the basis of religion and the population of East Bengal became part of the new state of Pakistan. But religious ideology failed to unite Pakistan. Finally, approaching the issue of what should be the state language of Pakistan, on 23 February 1948, a Bengali opposition member of Pakistan National Assembly, Dharendra Nath Dutta, claimed that Bangla would be the state language of Pakistan. But his claim was rejected by Liaquat Ali Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan and other non-Bengali members in the Assembly. Khan’s stance was unequivocal:

*“Pakistan has been created because of the demand of 100 million Muslims in this subcontinent and the language of a hundred million Muslims is Urdu. Pakistan is a Muslim state and it must have as its lingua franca the language of the Muslim nations.”*

(Government of Pakistan, Constitutional Assembly of Pakistan Proceedings, Second Session, 25 February (Karachi 1948, p.15- 16).

On the other hand, Bengalis showed their emotional responses against Khan’s stance. Thompson (2007) points out, “the Bengali response to this was equally emotive. Even though the vast majority of Bengali Muslims had strongly welcomed the idea of a Muslim state, disillusionment now quickly set in with Khan’s dictatorial response” (p.53). As a result, after a long struggle, the East Bengal Legislative Assembly recommended Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan. The movement achieved its goal by forcing the Pakistan Constituent Assembly in adopting both Bangla and Urdu as the state languages of Pakistan. Finally, in 1971, after a nine-month war of independence, Bangladesh won full national status.

### **The role of English language**

There was a long history when English started its journey in Bangladesh. The East India Company played the central role for spreading English in India and Bangla. So, the colonial rule was the key player for spreading English in Bangladesh. By 1800, the College of Fort William was established in Calcutta to teach local languages to East India

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

Company officials. But, recognizing the value of English, the educated middle class established a college to teach English language and literature (Hossain and Tellefson, 2003). So, it was not only the British but also the local elites who wanted English education, due to its social and economic value (Pennycook, 1994).

The purpose of British education was to create a small elite group for dominating the colonial people. For this reason, English got popularity only a small group of people who got the chance to access the limited numbers of jobs. On the other hand, the common people received their education in Bangla. This situation continued after the colonial period of independence Pakistan. While the nationalist sentiment led to the growth of Bangla language, English language remained the medium of instruction at the higher institutions as well as the common link language between the two wings of East and West Pakistan.

### **Language policy in the academic arena**

After the independence of Bangladesh, education got the highest priority among not only the small group of people but also the common people. With this objective, the Government of Bangladesh had established several Education Commissions and Committees since the independence of the country. One of the primary mechanisms for debating the appropriate roles of English and Bangla had been a series of educational commissions established by the government.

The first Education Commission was formed in 1972, headed by the leading educationist and scientist Dr. Qudrat-e-Khuda. The commission submitted its report to the Government in May 1974 (Bangladesh educational statistics, 2003). The report was formulated and was based on the socio-economic and political state and cultural heritage of the country. The Report claimed that Bengali has many advantages as the medium of instruction, particularly its value in developing students, “natural intelligence”, original thinking, and imagination (Ministry of Education, 1974, p. 14) However, despite its support for Bangla, the commission also argued that English should remain the language of higher education until the colonial educational system could be reformed. The Commission also recommended that second- language instruction should begin in Grade 6 (Hossain and Tollefson, 2003, p.250).

In the Commission’s report, the Madrasah educational system was organized differently from the rest of education in Bangladesh. Later educational commissions (which issued reports in 1987, 1997, and 2000) continued this dual-language process. But over the years, the commissions tended to extend the teaching of English. For example, the report 2000 made an optional subject in Grades 1 to 2 and compulsory from Grade 3. Recently,

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

English had been made compulsory from Grade 1(Hossain and Tollefson, 2003, p.250). For the two national secondary examinations, English is a compulsory subject.

For the small number of students who continue secondary school, options include 3-year general degree in arts, science and commerce, or 4-year honours degree; or 4-year professional degrees in medicine, engineering and agriculture. Postgraduate degrees are offered at the MA and PhD level. The medium of instructions is English; Curricula, syllabi, and materials are in English. Thus, students who attend Bangla – medium schools and wish to continue their education must eventually enter English- medium instructions where they are at a significant competitive disadvantage compared to students who attend English-medium schools beginning in the elementary level. (Hossain, 2004).

### **English in the educational policy**

The proper role of English and Bangla in Bangladesh is one of the most debatable issues among all policymakers who have shaped the role of language in the academic arena since independence. One group of policymakers favors English as the language of education and other group favors the use of Bangla in education.

The first group argues that the role of English opens doors to large possibilities for economic development (Hossain, 2004). The second group argues that the continued use of English is not only unfair to rural populations, who have not access to high-quality English-language teaching, but is also pedagogically unsound. A third group tries to reach a compromise between the previous two positions and agrees that English is necessary for development; its use creates serious inequalities that must be addressed.

So, the result of these disagreements make of three types of schools on the basis of medium of instruction and the role of religion. Bengali-medium schools where Bangla is the medium of instruction and English-medium schools where English is the medium of instruction and madrasahs where medium of instruction is Bangla but the main target is to teach religion and to learn Arabic language.

In reality, there are three educational policies. In Bangla-medium schools, English is taught as a compulsory subject, whereas most classes and informal interaction take place in Bangla. In English-medium schools, Bangla is used for much of the informal social interaction, but English is used for subject-matter instruction. In addition, the Madrasah religious educational policy uses Bangla and Arabic as media of instruction.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

## **The Constitution of Independent Bangladesh and language system**

On November 4, 1972, Bangladesh adopted its new Constitution and placed the Bangla language at the center of Bangladeshi nationalism. The Constitution also declared Bangla “the state” language. (Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972, p.3). At the same time, ignoring minority people, the Constitution established Bangla as a medium of instruction. The constitution recognizes “the people” as the Bengali people (Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972). At the national level, a Bangla Academy was set up to promote the development of Bengali language and culture. As a result, the government’s refusal to recognize the existence of non-Bengali people pushed non-Bengali communities towards the periphery.

Despite the constitutional provision for Bangla as the medium of instruction, the educational system did not immediately adopt Bangla as a universal medium of instruction. At the universities, apart from the English departments, students have the option of answering examinations in either Bangla or English.

Though the standard of English nationally in Bangladesh is not high, and English is still an urban, elite language, with independence, globalization, satellite television, business communication, and FM radio, etc, Bangladesh is being exposed to English as never before. The entrance of Bangladesh into the garment industry and free trade world has created an increasing awareness of the need for English communication skills. The phenomenal growth of the IT industry in Bangladesh has also made people aware of the importance of English as a language of communication. As in the past, English has become essential for economic purposes. The importance of English in Bangladesh today may be measured by the formal recognition of English as a second language in 2001 (Banglapedia, 2006).

### **The choice of English in language policy**

In recent years, English language gradually plays the hegemonic role in Bangladesh. Like other developing countries of the world, the situation of Bangladesh needs to re-think about this complex condition. That is why, Bamgbose (2003) rightly points out, “English has been found useful and functional; it opens the doors to knowledge and technological advancement and it is the language of globalization par excellence” (p.4).

In the present global world with its technological advancement, the international language and use of English has been growing at a startling rate, in particular in the parts of the developing world. It is therefore natural to wonder how far English may have advanced into the lives and languages of those in Bangladesh. It is now found that

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

English is widely used in several domains, including education, science, technology, commerce and industry, and informal social contacts.

Furthermore, Bangladesh has a long history of contact with English. On the other hand, it is not easy to make a definitive statement about the role of English in Bangladeshi life. The following are the five observations which indicate something of the degree to which English has presence in the country and may be compared with the national language.

1. *Very few Bengalis, even after years of school education, learn to speak English fluently, unless they spend considerable time abroad.*
  2. *Outside of Dhaka it is impossible for a non-bangla-speaking foreigner to communicate. Outside of Dhaka all signposts are in Bangla, except on the few major roads.*
  3. *Primary education in Bangladesh is predominantly based on rote learning. Children learn to recite English poetry without understanding a word.*
  4. *Being able to speak English is a highly rated ability. People have a rosy and rather unrealistic picture of life the UK or the USA.*
  5. *Almost all Bengalis think that Bangla is the most beautiful language in the world.*
- (Simpson, 2007)

So, the problem of choice is perhaps more evident when applied to individuals. It would appear that because of enormous advantages knowledge of English, people demand and opt for English. For example, English now enjoys the status of second language and it is widely used for the internal purposes in Bangladesh. For this reason, English plays the central role for gaining the prospects of better jobs and upward social mobility. This argument makes sense in the light of investments that people make sending their children to English-medium schools, hiring private English tutors etc. Can anyone imagine a candidate for the post of Governor of Bangladesh Bank who does not speak English? For this reason, English is compulsory. So, when a policy maker thinks of a suitable language policy in Bangladesh, she/ he should consider this hegemonic condition of English.

However, some major forces of free choice are historical, economic and bureaucratic. So, the economic power is one of the greatest reasons for the hegemonic situation of English in Bangladesh. Under the normal circumstances, a student wants to choose to learn a language that offers the prospect of a good job or social advancement. It is still the case that English is prestigious, particularly in international business and communication.

In Bangladesh, where English is used in the internal purposes, it is a major determinant of position and power. For this reason, parents insist on their children learning English from

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

kindergarten or speaking English at home though English is not the language of the community. The idea is to position the children for a good education and prospects of economic advancement. It is also true for the choice of adults. They are forced by the hope of expected economic prospects and rewards (Bamgbose, 2003).

### **Implication of language policy in relation to English**

From the above discussion, we come to know that language policy in relation to English is the one method that must help to overcome this hegemonic condition. That is why, Bamgbose (2003) rightly points out, “Language policy discourse in relation to English has implications for language planning, particularly with regard to extending its scope beyond language, and ensuring that it is inclusive, equitable, and ultimately designed to promote the overall cultural and economic development of a country.

The hegemony of English is a reality that language policy and planning should take account of” (p.9). Hence, to implement a language policy in relation to English for Bangladesh, the policy makers should think about the present situation of English language and tries to avoid most of the undesirable effects associated with hegemony.

Thus, Bangladesh needs a pragmatic language policy considering its present socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions. Now it is the right time to think language policy in relation to English. No doubt Bangladeshis have a glorious past and they feel proud of their language. However, when a policy designer wants to implement a pragmatic language policy in relation to English, he/she consider the following guidelines.

Firstly, it must be recognized that language is not about language alone (Harriman and Burnaby, 1996, p.13) but also it encompasses sociopolitical and economic issues. For example, some of the problems associated with educational failure can be tackled with better funding, closer attention to institutional structures and curriculum reform.

So, when Bangladesh wants to think of its language policy, it would be wise to implement it on the basis of its sociopolitical and economic issues. No doubt, the present sociopolitical and economic situation of Bangladesh exposes that Bangladesh needs a pragmatic language policy to overcome its hegemonic condition because English has already enjoyed the second language environment in Bangladesh.

As a former colonial country, English is related to our sociopolitical issues. At the same time, as a poor economic country Bangladesh needs global language to strength its economy. Bangladesh also needs to export its manpower to overcome the load of over population. To do this, Bangladesh needs English because it is now enjoying the

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts



opportunity of global language. So, a meaningful bilingual society helps to develop Bangladesh and gives the strength of the future generation of Bangladesh.

Secondly, an effective language policy should be implemented not only for minority but also for the generality of the population. A language policy in relation to English becomes effective if Bangladesh will get the current opportunity of the global world thinking of the general condition of its people. Otherwise, it would be impossible to face the present technologically advantages and knowledge based society around the world. For this reason, a bilingual policy is better than a monolingual in relation to English in Bangladesh. So, a meaningful bilingual education will ensure the combination of the mother tongue and English.

Thirdly, language policy must be equitable in that it should minimize the incidence of exclusion, whether in terms of those who have access or who are denied access on grounds of language alone ( Bamgbose, 2000:8-16). Presently, Bangladesh faces the challenge of individual opportunity of globalization. In Bangladesh, globalization becomes the bliss of some groups of people where the large numbers of common people deprive of it. Easily, Bangladesh solves this unequal situation adopting a pragmatic language policy and gives the equal chance of its future generation. Otherwise, Bangladesh suffers some basic problems to fulfill its millennium development goal.

Finally, a language policy is not an end in itself. The rationale for it must be what it can contribute to the overall cultural, human and socioeconomic development of a country (Afolayan, 1984: 1; Reagan, 1995: 320; Webb, 1996:186; Bamgbose, 2000:160). In this connection, it is not enough to place emphasis on globalization, information and communication technology, and the need for a language of wider communication to the detriment of the first language through which most of the population can participate and make any meaningful contribution to national development (Bamgbose, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

We may conclude that the reality of language policy discourse in Bangladesh today is that it inevitably moves towards English. So, our political decision is very important to implement a pragmatic language policy in relation to English. Our national unity is also another important point to create a bilingual environment considering the present monolingual situation. However, to propose a pragmatic language policy, Bangladesh needs to complete some processes. All necessary processes are important to implement a proper language policy in Bangladesh. For this reason, this article tries to suggest some processes which are necessary searching for a pragmatic language policy in relation to English in Bangladesh.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

---

---

## References

- Afolyan, Adebisi. (1984). The English language in Nigerian education as an agent of proper multilingual and multicultural development. *Journal of multilingual and multicultural Development*. 5 (1), 1-22.
- Bamgbose, Ayo. (2000). *Language and Exclusion*. Hamburg/London: LIT Verlag.
- Bamgbose, Ayo. (2003). A recurring decimal: English in language policy and planning. *Journal of World Englishes*, vol.22, No 4. pp. 419-432.
- Baumgardner, R.J. (1996). *South Asian English: Structure, use, and users*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Bangladesh educational statistics 2003*. (2003). Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS).
- Banglapedia*. (2006). Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Retrieved August 13, 2008, from [http://banglapedia.org/HT/E\\_0059.HTM](http://banglapedia.org/HT/E_0059.HTM)
- Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*. (1972). Dhaka, Bangladesh: Government Printing Press. p.3
- Ethnologue*, (2005). Languages of Bangladesh. Retrieved March 10, 2005, from <http://www.languageinindia.com>
- Hossain, T and Tollefson, J.W. (2006). Language policy in Education in Bangladesh. edited Tsui, A. B.M and Tollefson, J.W. *Language Policy, Culture, and Identity in Asian Contexts*. London: Routledge. pp.248-253
- Humayun, R. (2003). *Bangladesh er Bivinna jatishotta o Tader Bhasa*. Seminar on the Occasion of International Mother Language Day, Vidyasager Society, Dhaka: Bangladesh.
- Hossain, T. (2004). *English education in post colonial Bangladesh: The use of English as a medium of instruction*. Unpublished master's thesis, International Christian University, Tokyo.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts

Harriman, Michael and Burnaby, Barbara (eds) (1996) *Language policies in English-domain countries*, Clevedon, UK: Multilingual matters.

Kachru, Yamuna, Nelson, Cecil. (2006). *World Englishes In Asian Contexts*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Mohsin, A. (2003). Language, Identity, and the state in Bangladesh. edited Brown, E.M and Ganguly, S. *Fighting words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*. Washington.D.C: MIT Press. p.81

Pennycook, Alistair. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. London: Longman.

Reagon, Timothy (2001). The promotion of linguistic diversity in multilingual settings: policy and reality in post-apartheid South Africa. *Language problems and Language planning*, 25 (1).pp. 51-72.

Thompson, H. (2007).Bangladesh.( eds) Simpson, A. *Language and National Identity in Asia: a thematic*. London: Oxford University Press. p.53

Webb, Vic (1996) English and Language planning in South Arifca: The flip-side. *In Focus on South Africa*. Edited *World Englishes* 12 (3) (1993) Symposium on Linguistic Imperialism.

=====  
Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. English  
Faculty  
Department of Languages  
IUBAT-International University of Business Agriculture and Technology  
Uttara Model Town  
Uttara  
Dhaka-1230  
Bangladesh  
[monj0603@gmail.com](mailto:monj0603@gmail.com)

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Md. Monjurul Islam, M.A. in English

A Pragmatic Language Policy in Relation to English: Bangladesh Contexts