

English in Bangladesh: Resistance versus Utility

Sukanto Roy, Ph.D. Candidate in Composition & TESOL

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Abstract

This paper tries to investigate the causes of the resistance to speak in English by a group of people in Bangladesh. To accomplish the task, I have explored the complex linguistic background through which Bangladesh has evolved. Apart from this, this article expands upon earlier research on the historical perspective of linguistic background of Bangladesh. Finally, it suggests that the localization and contextualization of English in accordance with the Bangladeshi cultural values.

Keywords: resistance, English, Bangladesh, Banglalization, cultural values

Introduction

After completing MA in ELT (English Language Teaching) from the University of Dhaka, I joined Notre Dame College, Dhaka, Bangladesh on July 2009 as a Lecturer in English. It is a prestigious Christian Missionary College established in 1949. I was assigned to teach the English language class. I was also appointed as the Co-moderator of Notre Dame English Language Club which used to organize extra-curricular activities for students to enhance their fluency in English. While teaching at Notre Dame College, Dhaka, I came across several problems associated with the teaching of English. Since I had to teach English Language class, I used to speak in English and tried to motivate my students to speak in English as well. My motivation worked well as I saw; however, I discovered that a few students were unwilling to speak in English. As an English Lecturer, according to my personal observation, in Bangladesh nowadays most of the students want to learn English due to several socio-economic factors. However, somehow those students developed that notion of resistance from either their parents or from their surroundings. This paper makes an attempt to investigate the cause of this sort of

resistance to speak in English by a particular group of people in Bangladesh by exploring the complex linguistic background from the historical perspective through which Bangladesh has evolved.

English in British Period

“Bangla” is the state language of Bangladesh. But there is long history through which Bangladesh has come to this. In order to understand the linguistic history of Bangladesh, it is important to know the political history of Bangladesh as they are inter-mingled. Bangladesh was the part of the greater India and was colonized by the British rulers for about two hundred years from 1857 to 1947 and its name was East-Bengal. During the British period, English was used as the official language. The East India Company played the central role in spreading English in the greater India. 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 language to East India Company. But, recognizing the value of English, the educated middle class established a college to teach English language and literature (Hossain and Tollefson, 2006). Therefore, it was not only the British but also the local elites who wanted English education, due to social and economic value (Pennycook, 1994). The purpose of British education was to create a small group for dominating the colonial people. For this reason, English got popularity only among a small group of people who got the chance to access the limited numbers of jobs (Islam, 2011). When the British left India in 1947 dividing India and Pakistan, Bangladesh became a part of Pakistan and was named as East Pakistan.

Civil Unrest in Pakistan Period

The British Government divided greater India into two parts on the basis of religion. However, the religious ideology failed to unite Pakistan. Finally, approaching the issue of what should be the state language of Pakistan, on February 23, 1948, a Bengali opposition member of Pakistan National Assembly, Dharendra Nath Dutta, claimed Bangla would be the state of Pakistan (Islam, 2011). Dutta’s claim was rejected by Liaquat Ali Khan, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan and other non-Bengali members in the Assembly. Khan strongly argued: “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, February 25, 1948, Karachi, p. 15-16). On the other hand, Bengalis showed their emotional responses against Khan’s stance. Thomson (2007) illustrates, “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, civil unrest broke out.

Language Movement of 1952

In the height of the civic unrest, the then Governor-General of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah arrived in Dhaka on March 19, 1948. On March 21, at a civic reception at Racecourse Ground, he claimed that the language issue was designed by a "fifth column" to divide Pakistani Muslims. Jinnah further declared that "Urdu, and only Urdu" embodied the spirit of Muslim nations and would remain as the state language, labelling those who disagreed with his views as "Enemies of Pakistan". Jinnah delivered a similar speech at Curzon Hall of the University of Dhaka on March 24, 1948. At both meetings, Jinnah was interrupted by large segments of the audience. Before Jinnah left Dhaka on March 28, he delivered a speech on radio reasserting his "Urdu-only" policy. The unrest continued and the students of the University of Dhaka and other political activists defied the law and organized a protest on February 21, 1952. The movement reached its climax when police killed student demonstrators on that day. The deaths provoked widespread civil unrest. After years of conflict, the central government relented and granted official status to the Bengali language in 1956. In 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February as International Mother Language Day, in tribute to the Language Movement and the ethnolinguistic rights of people around the world. In Bangladesh, February 21 is observed as *Language Movement Day*, a national holiday (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali_Language_Movement).

Language Policies after Independence in Bangladesh

In 1971, Bangladesh became independent through a bloody battle of nine months with Pakistan and emerged as a sovereign nation in the world. Being an independent nation, the spirit of nationalism, as well as a sense of decolonization, became stronger than ever which ultimately functioned in favor of Bangla as a language. Like many other post-colonial nations, Bangladesh

also attempted to exclude English as it was comprehended to be a potential threat to the enrichment and domination of Bangla. According to Begum (2015), after becoming a free nation, language policies in favor of Bangla emerged with two prime objectives: to place Bangla at the peak of linguistic esteem, and to eliminate other languages, mainly Urdu and English. These policies successfully eliminated Urdu from Bangladesh but, in the case of English, things remained conflicting and contradictory.

Declaration of Bangla as National Language of Bangladesh

The 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh gave Bangla the status of sole national language to be used in administration and the judiciary, and as the medium of instruction in education (Chowdhuray & Kabir, 2014). The first Education Commission was formed in 1972, headed by the leading educationalist and scientist Dr. Quadrat-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 Bangla has many advantages as the medium of instruction, particularly its value in developing students' natural intelligence, original thinking, and imagination. 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 English should be taught from Grade 6 to 12 only (Hossain and Tollefson, 2006).

Effects of Banglalization

After independence, several domains were affected due to government's language policy. Banu & Sussex (2001a) points out that after Bangladesh became independent in 1971; one of the first domains to be affected by the government's Banglalization effort was the domain of education, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. All English-medium schools were abolished in 1972. The abolition of English-medium schools was accompanied by a corresponding removal of English from all public service and departmental examinations in pursuance of the policy of Banglalization of the administration. A Bangla-medium educational system supported well the effort of Banglazing the administrative and legal structures. At the tertiary level, however, the banning of English overnight was not possible; English was allowed

to continue parallel with Bangla as the language both of instruction and examination. In tertiary education, English had an optional and non-statutory status. As a result, university education began to suffer because it had been traditionally English-medium in the sense that not only were the lectures delivered mainly in English, but books and journals were also available mostly in English. While it was simply not practicable for the universities to switch completely to Bangla, the presence of Bangla-medium students with inadequate proficiency in English affected several aspects of university education. Bilingual lectures and switching back and forth between Bangla and English became a common form of classroom communication.

The Bangla Language Introduction Act

In 1987, “The Bangla Language Introduction Act” was passed by the government of Bangladesh. The aim of the Act was to ensure the use of Bangla in all spheres and at all levels for government purposes. Repeated orders and directives, verbal and written, were issued by the government to enact the law. It was the most effective Act that proclaimed Bangla as the national and official language of Bangladesh and strictly prohibited the use of English anywhere. As a consequence of this Act, Bangla immediately replaced English in all spheres of national life and created a “vacuum” in English Language proficiency and deprived the nation of numerous global opportunities for so many years (Banu & Sussex, 2001a; Rahman, 2005). Imam (2005) says that the sentimental rhetoric in favor of Bangla saw English as a great challenge to the national language and national identity. Sen (2008) regrets such post-independence policy decision to exile English from the country, a preference in favor of Bangla that would have long-term repercussions (as cited in Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). Hamid et al. (2013) report how gradually over the next decade or so policy makers started realizing the damage done to English teaching and learning as a consequence of such nationalist policies.

Reintroduction of English in Bangladesh

Within the five years after the declaration of “Bangla Language Introduction Act,” the importance of English was realized by the government of Bangladesh. In 1992, through the introduction of competency-based primary curriculum, English was made a compulsory subject from Grade one by the National Curriculum Committee of Bangladesh (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). According to Banu & Sussex (2001a), the government’s rethinking of the role of English

within the education system was evident in its decision to reintroduce English at the tertiary level by passing legislation in 1992. The objective was to better equip graduates for the job market and generally raise academic standards to higher levels. In 1997, the University of Dhaka reintroduced compulsory remedial English language courses for all first-year students of all departments. English-medium schools which were banned in 1972 started to regrow. 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. English has become essential for economic purposes. The importance of English in Bangladesh may be measured by the formal recognition of English as a second language in 2001 (Islam, 2011).

Emphasis on English in the Global Era

For many practical reasons, an emphasis was put on the teaching of English in Bangladesh. Begum (2015) stated that in the era of globalization, the lights of English began to shine again in Bangladesh as she aspired to benefit from the global culture, economy, education and technology. Rahman, et al. (2006) provided their insightful explanation concerning the regeneration of English in Bangladesh: “English went underground but kept up a furtive existence. However, a realization of pragmatic and global needs has caused English to resurface.” In recent times, the Bangladesh Government has become more concerned with promoting English Language education. The President of Bangladesh declared that with a view to promoting employment abroad and encouraging the transfer of technology, emphasis will be laid on teaching the English language along with the mother tongue.

Assistance of NGOs in Promoting English Teaching in Bangladesh

Many NGOs (nongovernment organizations) also have come forward with a view to helping the Government of Bangladesh. “English Language Teaching Improvement Project” (ELTIP) has been established in 1997 with the funding of the UK Government to train the English teachers of secondary level (Hamid, 2010). Another two projects named “English in Action” (EiA) and “English for Teaching, Teaching for English” (ETTE) have also been established in 2008 to promote the English language in Bangladesh (Hamid, 2010). The U. S.

Embassy, Dhaka, Bangladesh is also playing an important role in the improvement of English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh by conducting several English Language Programs e.g. “English Language Fellow Program,” “English Language Specialist Program,” “E-Teacher Scholarship Program,” “English Access Microscholarship Program” etc. (http://dhaka.usembassy.gov/english_language_programs.html).

The Present Condition of English in Bangladesh

At present, in Bangladesh English is widely used in every sector of education, entertainment, commerce, trade, official correspondence, personal communication and so on. Banu & Sussex (2001b) states that the use of English in business and shop names in Bangladesh, which goes back to the era of British imperial rule, has survived the strongly nationalist movements of the 60s and 70s, and is now showing a resurgence under the more global and internationalizing forces of the 90s. Begum (2015) depicts the conspicuous presence of English in the socio-cultural context in Bangladesh with convincing evidence from the domains of media, press, and education. The most striking manifestation of the development of English is evident in the Bangladeshi media, principally in radio, advertising, television and motion pictures. The press in Bangladesh is abundantly decorated by English. English dailies and periodicals have daily, weekly, fortnightly and monthly circulation and sales all over Bangladesh. The linguistic situation of education in Bangladesh reveals a thriving state of English. The emphasis of English in education has noticeably grown since studies and reports repeatedly showed that one of the prime reasons behind the failure in the public examinations was the poor language skills in English language subjects. Literacy in English now commences from 3-4 aged children and English is learned and taught as a compulsory subject till the tertiary level of education. English medium schools and private universities have emerged as great facilitators of English in education: books of all subjects are in English, and the medium of classroom instruction is English. This has resulted in the promotion of fluent English speakers. Students of all disciplines go through basic English language skills courses both public and private universities. All the universities of Bangladesh run the Bachelor’s and Master’s program in English language, literature, linguistics and TESOL (Rahman, 2005).

Anti-English Feeling in Bangladesh

Now, some people in Bangladesh consider this wide use of English in every sphere of life to be a threat to the national language, identity, culture and development from the perspective of linguistic imperialism and hegemony around the world. Hasan et al. (2012) clearly state that it is pitiful that in Bangladesh the scope for using Bangla is becoming narrower. In job sectors, multinational companies want their employees to be well-versed in English. People are indirectly being discouraged to learn Bangla, for it does not bring any material benefit. It just reminds us the colonial education when British rulers patronized one group of Bengal community who mimicked English and excluded the other group who refused to be trained in English (Muhith, 1992). Siddiqui (2009) asserts that the imposition of English at an early age has become catastrophic for the students' language learning experience (as cited in Hasan et al. 2012). Siraji (2008) argues, "Without developing and enriching our mother tongue Bangla, it is folly to expect national developments though most Bangladeshi tends to ignore it." (as cited in Hasan et al. 2012) Hasan et. al (2012) regrets that the rich class of Bangladesh seems to be interested in learning and enriching the English language whereas Bangla remains deprived of the vast wealth of new developments in the domain of literature, philosophy, psychology and so on. Ibrahim (2008) criticizes that in Bangladesh there are some so-called wealthy people who live in posh areas and use luxurious cars do not speak in Bangla and this privileged elite class in Bangladesh has been formed through education in English medium (as cited in Hasan et al. 2012).

Recent Attack on the Use of English

The recent attack on the use of English has been made on February 16, 2014. "A writ petition was filed with the High Court on Sunday seeking commencement of the Bengali language in all spheres of life. Supreme Court lawyer Yunus Ali Akand filed the petition. He said the writ petition was filed for implementing the Bangla Language Introduction Act, 1987" ("Writ Petition filed" 2014). On February 17, 2014, "A High Court order has been issued, asking all sign boards, nameplates and number plates of vehicles to be written in Bengali language, except for foreign embassies and entities, in Bangladesh" ("Bangla for all boards" 2014). However, in spite of the order of the Bangladesh High Court, the use of English is still going on a large scale in Bangladesh. Begum (2015) states, "The random and frequent use of

English proves that English is inevitable in the sociocultural domain of Bangladesh. It is now merged into the language, identity, and cultures of Bangladeshis.”

Criticism on Mixing English with Bangla

On February 21, 2015, an article is published in a newspaper in Bangladesh called “New Age” vehemently criticizing the horrendous mixing of English with Bangla particularly by the young generation. According to Alamgir & Moneruzzaman (2015), use of Bangla language in all spheres of life is yet to be ensured when distortion of the language, pronunciation of Bengali words in a foreign accent, still go on unabated 63 years after the people of the country shed blood for their mother language. They say that the situation remains pretty sad although the Article 3 of the constitution stipulates, “The state language of the republic is Bangla” and the government has failed to comply with the two directives of the apex court in 2014 and 2012, that had asked authorities concerned to ensure use of Bangla in all spheres of life and take steps to stop distortion of the language. Bangla is still widely ignored at government and non-government offices, courts, business houses although there is a legal binding to use Bangla. Privately-run radios, television dramas, advertisements and many people, mostly youths, are still using incorrect and distorted Bangla words and sentences, pronouncing Bangla words in foreign accent and mixing it up with incorrect English prompting some to term it “Banglish,” as no effective steps have been taken to enforce Bengali Language Introduction Act 1987 to use the Bangla language in all offices and courts. Dhaka University professor emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury said, “It is unfortunate that Bangla is still ignored in offices and other places, being distorted every now and then and it is a manifestation of declining patriotism.” This shows that a group of scholars in Bangladesh, at present, are concerned about the random mixing of English with Bangla. According to their opinions, such mixture is the deviation from patriotic feelings and they urge the restoration of the national spirit by protecting Bangla from the influence of English.

Division among Policymakers’ Attitude towards English in Bangladesh

Policymakers are divided in their opinions regarding English education in Bangladesh. Islam (2011) states that the proper role of English in Bangladesh is one of the 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. The second group argues that the continued use of English is not only unfair to rural populations who have no access to high-quality English language teaching but also is pedagogically unsound. A third group tries to reach a compromise between the previous two positions and agrees that English is necessary for development but the inequalities created by its use must be addressed. So, the result of these disagreements makes of three types of schools in Bangladesh based on the medium of instruction and the role of religion. In Bangla-medium schools, Bangla is the medium of instruction and in English-medium schools; English is the medium of instruction. In Madrasahs, the medium of instruction is Bangla but the main target is to teach Islamic religion and Arabic language (Islam, 2011).

Short Discussion

In the light of above discussion, it can be said that Bangladesh has passed through a complex linguistic history. In British period, English was the official language and in Pakistan period, Urdu was imposed. The right to speak in Bangla is achieved by means of the sacrifice of blood. Therefore, there is an emotional attachment to the people of Bangladesh for their mother tongue. This anti-English feeling which is prevalent in Bangladesh is not same as it was when Bangladesh was colonized by the British rulers. The present anti-English feeling among some people in Bangladesh can be considered to be based on ideological stance in favor of preserving the national linguistic status of Bangladesh. It might be difficult to find out the exact reason (s) behind the resistance to speak in English by a particular group of people in Bangladesh. However, it can be inferred that the widespread of English is seen as a cultural assault by some people in Bangladesh. My personal standpoint is that we should accept English positively in Bangladesh to keep pace with the globalized world and at the same time, we should keep intact our own cultural values. For that reason, we can localize and contextualize the English language in accordance with the Bangladeshi cultural values. After all, we cannot deny that we are global citizens and so assimilating what is good in other cultures will enrich us.

Conclusion

Finally, it can be concluded that Bangladesh has evolved through a complex linguistic background and still today there prevails a somewhat chaotic linguistic state which necessitates realistic measures. The anti-English sensibility in Bangladesh is rooted in the efforts of colonization in the Indian subcontinent during the British colonial era (Begum, 2015). Resistance to English in Bangladesh now operates on an ideological level where a nationalist recovery of lost ground and recuperation of splintered Bangla identity demand a distance from English which was a colonial tool of consolidation and domination (Islam, 2011).

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Sukanto Roy, Ph.D. Candidate in Composition & TESOL
Department of English
Humanities & Social Science Building 506 S
981 Grant St.
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Indiana, PA 15701
USA
s.roy2@iup.edu