

Doomed to Fail: The Fate of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Bangladesh

**Debasish Biswas, M.A. (Eng. Lit), M.A. (Applied Language Studies),
Nasir Uddin Ahmed, M.A., M.Phil. and Sima Rani Sarker, M.A.**

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Introduction

English language teaching curriculum in the tertiary level has undergone several changes since Bangladesh became independent in 1971. The scale of these changes has of course been subject to the attitude of the political parties in power towards teaching-learning English. All governments since liberation have put considerable emphasis on teaching-learning English. Therefore, these changes are all well-meaning. The outcome of these changes, however, is difficult to measure.

The latest and the biggest change came in 1998 much in keeping with the global trend of teaching-learning English using the much talked about CLT. The then government in collaboration with the British Council and the British government's Department for International Development (DFID) introduced CLT with the high hopes that it would improve English Language teaching in the country.

Research literature, however, shows that attempts to introduce CLT into English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts have a low rate of success (Brindley & Hood, 1990), and implementing CLT has often proved difficult (Anderson, 1993; Ellis, 1994; Shamin 1996; Valdes & Jhones, 1991). Instead of taking stock of the existing condition of the stakeholders into consideration and conducting the most rudimentary kind of needs analysis (Brown, 1995), the planners of the latest change seemed to be more concerned with "getting a major policy 'on the books'" (Fullan, 1982.p.101) and no thought seems to have been given to the particulars of the learning context and the existing infrastructure.

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In this paper we will try to shed light on the English teaching- learning trend in tertiary level in Bangladesh using the four common places, i.e., subject matter, teachers, students, and milieu (Connelly and Clandinin, 1998) which might help to assess the fate of CLT in Bangladesh.

1. Subject Matter

In keeping with the goal of introducing CLT, the government has brought out a new book for classes for the tertiary level students who have already taken English lessons for ten years mostly in grammar-translation method (GTM). According to its preface, it was “developed” by a “team of writers trained in the UK” for well over a year as part of the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) jointly funded by the government of Bangladesh and the British Government’s Department of International Development(DFID). The Preface goes on to tell us that the process of the writing, trailing and evaluating the manuscript was carried out by a (sic) national and expatriate consultants of ELTIP in cooperation with the national Curriculum & Textbook Board of Bangladesh (NCTB). It informs us that the principle of learning a language by actually practising it underlay the project. To this end, each unit of the book provides reading texts and a range of tests and activities designed to enable students to practice the (four) language skills, sometimes individually and sometimes in pairs and groups.

Now let us weigh the extent to which our teachers in the tertiary level are equipped to implement the new approach.

2. Teachers

Teachers are the single largest stakeholders in implementing any change. Pennington (1989) says in this regard that the heart of every educational enterprise, the force driving the whole enterprise towards its educational aims, is the teaching faculty. Hence the nature of the faculty, in both its overall composition and the characteristics of its individual members, to a large extent determines the unique character of any language program (p. 91). Teachers’ perception of teaching, their teaching methods and skills, their understandings of the innovation

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are of primary importance to the curriculum change. The single most important feature of any program is the teaching faculty (p. 39).

Though more than a decade has passed since CLT was introduced, the English teaching community as a whole does not seem to have stirred much by the campaign. They still have preference to the age-old GTM over the new approach. Lack of motivation can be identified as the single largest reason behind this attitude of the teachers. And this motivation was due well ahead of introducing this new approach.

The in-class activities of an English teacher is similar to what Hong Wang and Han Han (2000, p. 82) observe in their study.

English teachers usually explain the rules of grammar, analyze the functions of words and phrases, and cites lots of example sentences, both for students for memorize and to support their explanation. Teacher student interaction is on the whole restricted to question and answer. Students are asked to read the text and list the unknown words and phrases. They are occasionally asked to answer some comprehension questions. The teachers discuss important question for the upcoming final exam. Students are sometime advised to buy certain 'guides' as a shortcut to success. There are quite a few 'guides' in the market to assist the poor students in facing the final exam. They are written in an oversimplified form and language and publicized as a quick fix to all problems with higher secondary English. The teachers often take help from these 'guides'. These 'guides' exist as a parallel to the text.

Surprisingly enough, despite the government attempts from time to time, the publication of these 'guides' has remained unabated. The class test is presented to exemplify grammatical items, accompanied by translation form English to Bengali (the mother tongue). Pattern drills on linguistic items are assigned as home work. Rote memorization is emphasized. Teachers advise students not only to memorize the grammar rules and question answers but also to practice it repeatedly through writing so that things last in their memory.

The reading assignments are similar to the observation of Cortazzi and Jin (1996 p. 183-184).

Reading is not treated in terms of meaning, form is isolated from function, oral skills and integrated skills are under developed, and the limited range of fairly formal styles is tackled in texts. More seriously, language as communication is neglected and the excessive focus on teacher-centered activity puts students into a passive role of listening and memorizing. Interactive interpretive and personal aspects of language are ignored.

A number of other issues like lack of orientation, in -service or pre-service training, class size, wash back, discrepancy in terms of academic qualification of teachers between public and private sector colleges can be related to the inability on the part of the teachers.

2.1 Lack of Orientation and in-Service and pre-Service Training

No initiative has so far been taken from the governments' side to familiarize this new approach with the teaching community though the teachers are repeatedly urged to adapt to CLT. A nationwide orientation has not yet been possible. The British Council in Bangladesh offers a 40 hours intensive training in CLT. The cost of this training program is pretty high. Only a few private colleges in and around the capital city can afford to get their teachers trained from the British Council. National, regional and international seminars and conferences on CLT and journals on CLT could provide the teachers with some ideas about CLT. Unfortunately, teachers in general have almost no access to these. A pre-service training is not required to join as English teachers in the tertiary level due to the sheer lack of graduates in the subject. In-service opportunity for training in CLT is almost absent. The government has not yet been able to establish a Teachers' Training College for Tertiary Level English teachers; such colleges for Secondary and primary school teacher are there though. Joining a training program (a short course like a diploma program, for example) abroad may equip teachers amply to apply CLT but getting such an opportunity is getting increasingly difficult given the global economic recession. Bureaucratic complicacy often discourages teachers to venture abroad for a higher

training in teaching. If or when a teacher manages a scholarship abroad, he has to go through a lot of bureaucratic hassle and tussle to avail himself of the opportunity.

Three Types of Colleges

There are three types of colleges here in Bangladesh- public, semi-public and private. There is an obvious discrepancy in terms of qualification of English teachers among these colleges. Up till mid nineties there were no hard and fast rules about the qualification of English teachers in the colleges. With the introduction of CLT, the education ministry brought about an amendment in the existing recruitment policy.

An aspiring English Teacher now must have an MA degree. An MA again can be earned from four different places- from a public university, a private university, a university college and a madrasa (educational institutions run on religious philosophy). In terms of quality, an MA from a public university is considered to be the best. There are only a handful of public universities in Bangladesh. These universities can accommodate around 1500 students each year in their English Departments, whereas the candidates vying for these seats are thousands if not millions.

The unsuccessful candidates pursue their MA in the university colleges or in private Universities where the standard of teaching is far below the public universities. Majority of the graduates from the English departments of the public universities opt for a career not in teaching but in other sectors like in the public administration, multi-national firms, banks, joint-ventures and large private companies where they are offered fat salary and attractive benefits. Only a negligible portion of these graduates opt for teaching and they are recruited in the public colleges. The semi public and private colleges mostly employ the graduates from university colleges and private universities. This creates a huge gap in terms of qualification of teachers between public and private sector colleges.

Again a good number of colleges in the rural areas run without even a full-time English teacher, because teachers prefer not to go to the remote areas. These colleges run by hiring a part-time teacher from the nearest township. Even worse, teachers of other subjects sometimes

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get into the shoes of the English Teachers. As the demand for English teachers is ever increasing, the people in this profession never bother about improving their teaching skills. As Li (1998) points out in this regard that this situation ensures many teachers that they are secure with their job however they teach. They stay in their small egg crates, teaching year after year in their fossilized English and with their fossilized methods, doing their best to neglect the fact that language teaching requires a special combination of knowledge and skills” (p. 108).

2.2 The Evaluation System

The evaluation system has posed a great challenge for the implementation of CLT. On successful completion of two years of study in a college, the students qualify to appear at the final exam called higher secondary certificate (HSC) examination. Students have to qualify in a pre-final examination called the ‘test’ exam to appear at the HSC. The question standard of this ‘test’ is not uniform nationwide. Semi-public and private colleges often set sub-standard questions so that their students can pass the ‘test’ and take the HSC, otherwise they will lose money. The passing rate in HSC ranged between 45%-55% over the last three decades.

With the introduction of CLT it was expected that the success rate would increase. However, it has not made much difference. To make things worse, the education ministry declared that if the passing rate of a college falls below 35% for three consecutive years, a certain portion of the government grant would be withdrawn. The passing rate of a college absolutely depends on the success rate in English and therefore the teachers have hardly any time or scope for thinking about any innovation in their teaching methods.

2.3 Teachers’ Low Salary

Teachers’ low salary and low status in the society has a lot to do with their reluctance to invest time and energy to do some innovation in the traditional teaching. Take home salary of college teachers ranges from \$120-\$165 per month. In order to maintain a minimum standard of living, the teachers are often forced take a part-time jobs. Apart from this, private tutoring is widely adopted as a means for some extra cash. Sometimes teachers teach in coaching centers.

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These coaching centers have a potential threat for the academic education in general and CLT in particular. These centers provide students with readymade notes of probable questions and simulated tests to boost their confidence to take the HSC. As the coaching centers do not need to have any registrations from the government, they are mushrooming and existing as a parallel or alternative to the classroom teachings of the colleges. Students are rushing like mad as the centers guarantee a 'sure success'. It is a popular complaint against the teachers that they teach more sincerely in the coaching centers or at their home than in the classrooms. The civil society and the ministry of education have raised their voice from time to time against the detrimental role played by these coaching centers but things have remained mostly unchanged.

2.4 Acute Shortage of Facilities and Resources

CLT requires small class size. An intermediate class in Bangladesh, however, often consists of 80-120 students. CLT involves individualized attention which is not possible in such large classes. More often than not college classrooms are not separated by concrete walls posing difficulty for the speaking activities which is a vital feature of CLT. If or when everyone starts talking in an English class, the class can be very noisy resulting in disturbance for the neighboring classes. The seating arrangement is problematic for communicative activities. Students are seated on long wooden benches which are lined up and bolted to the floor. There is not even enough space for the teachers and the students to move around to carry out communicative activities like group discussion or any interactive activities. Some lessons in the new text accompany audio visual activity. But very few colleges have this facility in the class room.

Inadequate funding is another constraint. According to Li (1998), "to use CLT in teaching English, certain equipment and facilities must be in place". Bangladeshi colleges unfortunately have not yet been provided with the necessary equipments and the facilities. Neither the government nor the college authority earmarks any portion of the college fund for buying the necessary equipments for CLT. Only a few colleges in and around the capital city can afford to buy these. Another issue is involved with the use of these electronic equipments even if they are provided in the colleges nationwide. Though improving slowly and steadily, Bangladesh

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still has an acute shortage of electricity. Around 60% of the total area of Bangladesh is still without electricity. So colleges in those areas can't use the equipment even if they are supplied with.

3. Students

Before entering college, students have taken English lessons for ten years in succession as a compulsory subject in their schools. During this period, students have around two hours' English lessons per week. Though English is incorporated as a compulsory subject both in primary and secondary level, it has not had the desired impact on learners in terms of basic competence in the language. They usually have a small vocabulary and a limited command of English structures. Apart from the English medium schools, speaking is not a part of classroom activities in the secondary schools across the country. Therefore, when the students are face to face with the activities of a communicative syllabus, they feel out of place. They have great difficulty expressing themselves in English if or when they are assigned to do so. This failure may lead to an eventual aversion to the syllabus and the students may desperately try to 'traditionalize' it so that it matches their 'old style' of learning English and at the same time paves the way for securing pass marks. The students are concerned about the importance of learning English for communication. But they are more concerned about getting a pass mark somehow and get an entry in the Universities.

Students don't have any orientation regarding peer evaluation and they traditionally consider their teachers the sole authority to dispense knowledge and evaluate their progress. It is for this reason that students tend to be suspicious of activities like peer evaluation, as they believe it is the teacher's job to evaluate and that peers are not qualified to correct others' work.

Learning is essentially a process of reception. Students expect to receive and retain, with an open mind and without preconceptions, the knowledge imparted by their teachers and textbook.

Learning is a process of repetition. Students believe that to acquire knowledge and understanding, they need to repeatedly study what they do not understand. Rote learning and memorization is the most valued learning strategy of Bangladeshi students. The way memorization is carried out and used by Bangladeshi students suggests that it is part of a deep approach to learning. Students are generally panicky about learning English and they consider learning English an arduous and humdrum job. They hardly ever think that there can be any pleasure associated with learning English. This sense of seriousness which is involved particularly in learning English would keep the students away from engaging themselves in certain fun-filled activities in CLT.

CLT requires that students be active participants in classroom activities. Students of Bangladesh, however, have been traditionally passive and shy in the class. The social belief and values has a lot to do with it. From the very childhood the parents teach their school going wards the classroom manners which include neither arguing with the teacher nor asking questions. Therefore, a sense of awe and separation develops in the learners' mind from their very childhood and students sit mute and passive in the classroom throughout their student life. A negligible percentage of students occasionally share ideas with the class teachers. It can be argued that the aforementioned attitudes towards learning are largely incompatible with CLT practices that take a holistic approach to learning, down play the importance of memorization, stress verbal interaction (often at the expense of inner activity), and encourage speculation (e.g. guess work) and tolerance for ambiguity.

4. Milieu

According to Connelly and Clandinin, (1998), 'If our interest is with a student in a curriculum situation, then everyone else and everything else in that situation may be said to be part of the students' milieu'. English teachers, especially those in the semi government and private colleges have to work under pressure. This pressure comes from different quarters and in different magnitude. The most powerful pressure or 'threat' comes, as I have already mentioned, from the education ministry. These colleges count on the performance of the English teachers for a better success rate which will secure the continued financial support from the government.

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English teachers are always at the focus of attention because the success rate solely depends on the students' performance in English. If or when this rate falls for some reasons (not necessarily due to any lapse on the part of the English teachers), the blame tend to go on the English teachers.

The guardians of the students in general seem to be concerned about one thing-good grade of their kids. A 'good' teacher in the eyes of the society is he who helps the students get that good grade. It never matters even if the teacher does it at the cost of learning. On the other hand, a teacher showing the enthusiasm to embrace a new concept in teaching is often criticized and labeled as a 'renegade'.

A new dimension in the pressure has emerged in the recent years as manpower has surfaced as the single largest export item in the country's economy. Bangladesh is an over populated country with an acute unemployment problem and man power export has reasonably helped solving this problem. A considerable number of students are enrolling with the sole objective of earning an HSC as it is a preferred qualification for work abroad. This segment of the students wants a guarantee from the colleges that the colleges would do anything and everything to ensure 'pass marks' for them. Under such circumstances, the notion of cultivating students' communicative competence stays at the theoretical level only. English is taught to make students pass the HSC rather than a tool for developing a competence in communication.

4.1 Lack of Uniformity

Education system below university level is not uniform in Bangladesh and I would like to identify this lack of uniformity as the biggest challenge to implement CLT in Bangladesh. Four streams of education now exist in Bangladesh-Open and Distance Learning mode (ODL), the English Medium schools and Colleges, Madrasa, and the Conventional mode. The degree offered by the Conventional and ODL mode is called Secondary School Certificate (SSC). For English medium schools and Madrasas the degree is called ordinary ('O') level and 'Dakhil' respectively. These all four degrees are equal and they are mandatory for learners to qualify for

an admission to a college. The quality of teaching- learning varies a lot in these four different modes leading to a disparity in competence of the learners.

For example, the competence of an ‘O’ level student is higher than the level achieved by a student from other modes. This discrepancy in competence creates problem using CLT in the classroom as students coming from Conventional, ODL or Madrasa do not match their English medium counterparts.

Conclusion

At any rate CLT is a well meaning initiative of the government in the direction of refurbishing English teaching learning in the country. The government, however, should have taken a stock of the existing infrastructures, and the trends and tradition in teaching English before initiating it. There is no doubt that problems outweigh prospects in implementing CLT in the context of Bangladesh. The sooner the government initiates the process to bring uniformity to the education modes, the better. Teachers as well as students should be motivated to adopt and adapt. Students in Bangladesh traditionally get instrumental motivation for learning which can and should be replaced by integrative motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). The government should have a liberal attitude regarding the success rate as well. It would relieve the teachers to a great extent and encourage them to try out this new approach. Some problems in Bangladesh are inherently unsolvable and certain aspects might be ungovernable. It is worth taking into consideration, as Fullan (1982, p.81.) says that “being ungovernable, however, is not the same as being impervious to change.”

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Debasish Biswas, M.A. (Eng.Lit), M.A. (Applied Language Studies)
 Assistant Professor
 Center for English language
 Jagannath University
 9-10, Chittaranjan Avenue
 Dhaka-1100
 Bangladesh
debasish002@gmail.com

Nasir Uddin Ahmed, M.A, M.Phil.
 Associate Professor and Chair
 Department of English

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Jagannath University
9-10, Chittaranjan Avenue
Dhaka-1100
Bangladesh
nasirnuman@yahoo.com

Sima Rani Sarker, M.A.
Lecturer
Institute of Educational Development
BRAC University
66, Mohakhali
Dhaka 1212
Bangladesh
simasarker@yahoo.com

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