

# A Critical Investigation of the Status of English at the Tertiary Level Education in Bangladesh<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The status of English as a medium of instruction in higher education in Bangladesh has always been a contentious issue since public universities move back and forth for continuing with English as a medium of instruction or not. On the other hand, the introduction of private universities in Bangladesh complicated the issue even more. The medium of instruction in private universities in Bangladesh is invariably English, while public universities do promote English in all their official activities, and the teachers at public universities use both Bangla and English in their class lectures, leading to the questions of what is hindering them from promoting English and how are they confronting this challenge? In order to investigate these problems, this paper attempts to initiate the debate on the status of English in public and private universities at the tertiary level.

## Resumen

El inglés como medio de instrucción en la educación superior en Bangladesh ha sido un tema polémico, ya que las universidades públicas van y vienen para continuar con el inglés como medio de instrucción o no. Por otro lado, la introducción de universidades privadas en Bangladesh complicó aún más el problema. El medio de instrucción en las universidades privadas de Bangladesh es invariablemente el inglés, mientras que las universidades públicas promueven el inglés en todas sus actividades oficiales, y los profesores de las universidades públicas utilizan tanto el bengalí como el inglés en sus clases, lo que lleva a preguntar ¿qué les impide promover el inglés y cómo están enfrentando este desafío? Con el fin de investigar estos problemas, este artículo intenta iniciar el debate sobre el estatus del inglés en las universidades públicas y privadas de nivel terciario.

## Introduction

The importance of learning English at all levels of education is strongly emphasized by the government of Bangladesh, as the country relies on the use of English for maintaining international links and conducting business and trade internationally (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014; Erling et al., 2014; Farooqui, 2007; Kirkwood, 2013; Roshid, 2014). In Bangladesh, there is a growing need for English in job markets, and employees working in the business, industrial, and governmental sectors are expected to have proficiency in English (Erling, 2017; Farooqui, 2007). In addition, the improvement of the students' language skills will help them have "access to better economic and social opportunities" and provide them with "a route into work and out of poverty" (Erling, 2017; p. 389).

The national language of Bangladesh is Bangla or Bengali, and Bangla as the first language is used by 98% of the population (Imam, 2005). At present in Bangladesh, English is employed as "an important language of government, education and media" by 3% of the whole population of Bangladesh (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007, p. 243). The status of using English in Bangladeshi universities has always been inconsistent. At public universities in Bangladesh, teachers mix Bengali and English in classroom interactions, whereas private universities use only English as a medium of instruction. The inconsistency of using only English as a medium of instruction at private universities and mixing both English and Bangla as a medium of instruction at public universities is a problem since those students who have used English as a medium of instruction at private universities are finding better job opportunities in both the private and public sectors than those students from public universities. As a result, the students who are accustomed to mixing both English and Bangla as a medium of instruction at public universities are facing problems in their finding employment in their fields and often experience dissatisfaction with their jobs.

## Overview/Outline of the Study

The objective of the present study is to critically investigate the status of English at the tertiary level education in Bangladesh in both private and public institutions. In order to address the objective of the current study, this paper will also present information about the status of English after the independence

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of Bangladesh, English as a foreign language (EFL) in Bangladesh, English as a medium of instruction in both public and private universities in Bangladesh, and English as a prestige language.

### ***The English language in Bangladesh***

Even though the national policy directions of Bangladesh favour Bengali (the national language of Bangladesh), English has been constantly present in different domains in Bangladesh since the formation of Pakistan in 1947 and the later advent of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971 (Banu & Sussex, 2001a). The Language Movement that took place in 1952 in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and the legislative action adopted by the Bangladesh government since 1971 have offered the main backdrop to the decisions regarding policy making and the present role of English. According to Imam (2005), the Bangladesh government has been more concerned with enhancing the importance of English in order to cope with the growth of globalization. At present, Bangladesh relies on English for internal trades and business transactions with the outside world (Farooqui, 2007).

### ***English after the independence of Bangladesh***

Bangla's nation-binding role affected Bangladesh's language policy, and it was essential in establishing Bangla as the state language and medium of instruction in the education sector. The nationalist zeal of the government related to language policy in Bangladesh was responsible for neglecting English language education for a long period of time (Rahman, 2005). In 1989, the government of Bangladesh realized the pressing need to get access to the technological advancement that was made possible by globalization and made English Education mandatory in primary (years 1-5), secondary (years 6-10) and higher secondary (years 11-12) education and in some fields of higher education.

English was brought in as a mandatory subject from grades one through twelve on 19 January, 1989 across the country, irrespective of geographic location and social class. Hamid (2011) asserted that at present, English is considered an indispensable constituent of the national curriculum for students of grade one to twelve. From the very first day at school, students start getting instruction in English and their learning continues throughout their schooling.

The significance of English in learning and teaching was also endorsed by the 1992 National Constitution of Bangladesh. Bangla has stopped being the medium of instruction for higher education since most textbooks are written in English, and it is not possible to translate them into Bangla rapidly (Choudhury, 2001); as a result, English continues to dominate higher education in Bangladesh. In society, English is highly regarded for its prestige, power and role in international interactions.

### ***The place of English as EFL in Bangladesh***

In Bangladesh, English is considered as a Foreign Language (FL) among academicians. Farooqui (2007) stated that, "Outside the classroom, whom will we practise with? With your friends? They will laugh. It is not possible to practise speaking English with family members either" (p.103). English as a subject is taught in schools, colleges, and universities in Bangladesh. Since Bangladesh is a monolingual country and Bangla is spoken in all spheres of life, we do not have opportunities or need to practise English outside classes. Thus, English is a FL, not a second language (SL). However, as has been mentioned above, English is the medium of instruction in major subjects in public universities, as well as private universities, and it has continuously influenced urban educated Bangladeshis (Rahman, 2005).

### ***Rationale for Conducting the Research***

Taking into account the context and background of Bangladesh, we observe that public universities in Bangladesh are caught up in whether to promote English or not while teaching students of different disciplines. English should be the medium of instruction in public universities; this claim was substantiated when the premier university of Bangladesh, Dhaka University, brought back courses in remedial English for the students after the independence of Bangladesh.

In reality, while lecturing, the teachers at Dhaka University mix Bangla and English across many disciplines. However, the medium of instruction across all disciplines in private universities is invariably English. It is observed that students graduating from private universities do better at getting jobs in comparison with students from public universities. Companies and government offices recruit students who have proficiency in English language, but the public universities are not promoting English in all spheres. The challenges faced by the teachers at public universities have prompted the author to carry out the present study.

## Methodology

This is a review paper that relies on secondary data. For formulating this review, the researcher resorted to two electronic research databases, namely PsycINFO and MLA International Bibliography, with Google Scholar as a supplement and used a set of key words, for instance, the *status of English at the tertiary level in Bangladesh*, *English language in Bangladesh*, *English as a medium of instruction in Bangladesh*, and *English as EFL in Bangladesh* to locate research output/relevant studies. The author employed research articles from *Google Scholar* and books from *Google Books* as the sources or databases for this research work as well. Additionally, the researcher checked and consulted the reference lists of existing related articles/books in the Bangladeshi context such as Hamid (2011, 2016). The primary search on the basis of preceding specifications gave a total of 31 studies, out of them, twenty from *MLA International Bibliography*, ten from *PsycINFO*, and one from *Google Books*. To limit the current review to empirical research and peer-reviewed publications in English, the researcher first meticulously assessed these publications to filter out dissertations, theoretical/conceptual papers, and literature reviews. To meet the inclusion requirements for this review study, the researcher considered those publications that were published in English and empirical in nature, either on the status of English at the tertiary level or English as a medium of instruction in public or private universities as the research tool.

## Results

### ***English as a prestige language in Bangladesh***

In society, English is regarded highly for its prestige, power, and role in international interactions. As a result of the Anglo-American globalization, English is becoming more crucial for modernization and worldwide communication. Since English education is limited to a particular group of people in Bangladesh, global English serves as an instrument for social-political discrimination and distinction. The elite section of our country invests privately to learn about the English culture and language. The ability to communicate in English allows members of the social elite to stay in power in the country (Imam, 2005). The author adds that many Bangladeshis feel that learning English will enable them to obtain secure high-profile employment and possibly a "luxury" lifestyle overseas.

Those who graduate from private universities, where English is the medium of instruction, have access to better jobs, both governmental and corporate, compared with those who graduate from public or governmental universities. In addition, the political leaders of our country send their children to private universities or abroad for their higher studies. Thus, English is used as a political tool in our country. On the one hand, the political leaders of our country maintain that more focus needs to be given to Bengali as a medium of instruction at higher educational institutes; however, they send their children to private universities, whose medium of instruction is English, as previously mentioned. Thus, a controversial status of the teaching of English is apparent.

### ***English in the public higher education system in Bangladesh***

The government of Bangladesh realized the important role of English within the education system, and by passing legislation in 1992, in which the government decided to reintroduce English at the tertiary level in public universities throughout the country (Banu & Sussex, 2001).

Rahman (2005) states that since the 90s, English was introduced as a compulsory subject along with the other regular courses for various disciplines at the tertiary level in public universities. Hamid et al. (2013) report that in state-funded higher education, subjects of humanities and social sciences use Bangla as a medium of instruction, whereas English as a medium of instruction is used in disciplines under technology, science, medicine, and engineering in Bangladesh.

### ***English in the private higher education system***

Since the Bangladeshi Parliament passed the Private University Act of 1992 toward the latter part of 1992, these institutions started imparting higher education using English as a medium of instruction. English is known as a prestige language, and social elite of Bangladesh sends their offspring to private universities; on the other hand, those who are meritorious and come from middle class background get enrolled in public universities. According to Alam et al. (2007), the students at private universities come from relatively rich families of the society. They belong to the top five percent of the income groups in the country, for example, the highly paid professionals, households of business, well-off military and civil bureaucrats. Of the total of English-medium school graduates, at least 20% seek admission into private universities in Bangladesh (Banu & Sussex, 2001b). According to the University Grants Commission of

Bangladesh (2021a, b), there are 108 private universities in Bangladesh; on the other hand, there are only 50 public universities.

According to the report provided by BBC Bengali website (BBC Bengali, 2015), the majority of the students (63%) who get admitted by different private universities across the country come from Bengali medium schools and colleges (Sultana, 2014; Jahan & Jahan, 2011). At present, nearly 450,000 students are studying in private universities across Bangladesh (BBC Bengali, 2015; Hossain et al., 2014). After graduating from grade twelve, nearly 30% of the students have been admitted by different public universities in Bangladesh, i.e., the total number of students in public universities is 185,910 (Rahman, 2014). From the number of students from private universities, it is evident that more students get exposure to English as a medium of instruction. Thus, we can observe that there is a relation between the student population and English as the language of instruction.

### **The importance of English in the context of Bangladeshi private universities**

In Bangladesh, the number of private universities is increasing and will continue to increase in coming days because of the government policy. One of the educational related aims of the government is that all HSC (Higher Secondary School) graduates be accommodated in universities without going abroad; as a result, the government will continue approving private as well as public universities outside Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The number of private universities already outnumbers the number of public universities, and a large number of students are pursuing their undergraduate and post-graduate studies in private universities. In order to get a balanced idea about the status of English in Bangladesh, the importance of English in the context of private universities in Bangladesh demands discussion.

Farooqui (2007) suggested that in Bangladesh, the setting up of private universities is considered as one of the most significant reforms in the sector of education, and the aim of establishing private universities in Bangladesh is to give a larger percentage of students who succeed in passing H.S.C. every year to pursue their studies (Banu & Sussex, 2001). Bangladesh presents a notable increase in the number of private universities after the sanction of the Private University Act 1992, and the growth of private universities is seen, particularly, in cities (Rahman, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, it is obvious that the status of English in higher education, particularly in public universities, has been inconsistent. Many of the public universities in Bangladesh do not use English as the only medium of instruction for classroom interactions. On the other hand, private universities in Bangladesh are using English as the medium of instruction for all class activities and official and administrative works. The teachers at public universities in Bangladesh are facing challenges for employing English as a medium of instruction. Thus, the authoritative body of the government, particularly the University Grants Commission (UGC), needs to investigate the appropriate status of English in higher education in Bangladesh.

Even though the Bangladeshi government has stressed the importance of English learning over the last few decades, research has shown Bangladeshi students' English performance is poor (Kirkwood & Rae, 2011; Rahman, 2007; Siddique, 2004). In the 1990s, the Bangladeshi government made significant changes in language policy and passed legislation in 1992 introducing English as a mandatory subject from grades one through twelve for all government and government-subsidized schools and colleges, and *madrasahs* (religious schools), and reintroduced English as a compulsory course at the tertiary level in all public universities across the country.

English is considered a prestige language, and its role in Bangladesh is very significant. The increasing popularity of education in English (particularly in private sectors) can be seen among the people of Bangladesh, especially among the wealthier class, and English is known as a language of opportunity and upward mobility. It is observed that English has become instrumental for gaining economic advantages, and private companies in Bangladesh prefer employing those university graduates who possess higher level of proficiency in English; as a result, universities in Bangladesh (in reality, only private) tend to focus more on English.

With the discussion of the role of English in the historical context in Bangladesh, i.e., during the time of British colonization, before independence and after independence, it is worth mentioning that English has shown its presence in educational and administrative affairs in the previously stated period. Without assigning the proper status of English at higher educational institutions, particularly public universities

leave a trace of discrimination among the students. It has been indicated that English requires to be considered at the tertiary level due to its role in developing a skilled workforce. Secondly, all the stakeholders need to liaise with the governing/concerning bodies of the government and make them understand the importance of having a single policy for the status of English at the tertiary level education. Thirdly, research can be conducted to gauge the appropriate status of English at the tertiary level education in Bangladesh.

This review paper has argued that the relevant bodies of the government are still reluctant to come up with a 'single policy' for the status of English at public universities. For the overall growth of the country, there is no other way but to improve the status of English in the tertiary level education in Bangladesh if we do not want to lag behind in this globalized world.

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