Will CLT bail out the bogged down ELT in Bangladesh?

M. OBAIDUL HAMID and RICHARD B. BALDAUF JR.

Rural failure in English learning and the socioeconomics of ELT

Introduction

Over 24 million children learn English as a second/foreign language in primary and secondary schools in Bangladesh.[1] These children start learning the language as a required subject in Grade 1 and continue learning it (if they don't drop out) until Grade 12, and later at the tertiary level. Officially, they are taught English communicatively using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology, as it was envisaged that CLT would develop learners' 'communicative competence', and thereby strengthen the human resource development efforts of the Government of Bangladesh (NCTB, 2003).

Introducing English at the earliest grade possible (since 1991, Yasmin, 2005) and 'going *communicative*' (since 1997, Hamid, 2005) were two recent English language teaching (ELT) policy initiatives to develop Bangladeshi human capital. The communicative approach was also set as corrective intervention since despite years of schooling, 'our students are very weak in English and as a result they can't apply English in their practical life successfully' (NCTB, 2003, p. 3). It was hoped that CLT would revitalize these 'weak' learners' ability to learn English by 'improving the standard of teaching and learning English at different levels of formal education' (ibid.).

Nearly a decade has passed since CLT was first introduced in the national curriculum. It now seems appropriate to ask to what extent has it developed learners' competence and improved the declining standards of English in the country (Rahman, 1991)? While we do not underestimate the quantity, diversity and quality of evidence required to fully answer this question, we are able to present some data that may help develop some understanding of the role that CLT plays in enhancing learner competence in English in secondary schools in rural Bangladesh (Hamid, in preparation). When discussing this data, it is necessary to view it in its historical and ecological context (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2008). Briefly, we refer to ELT efforts in Bangladesh from the earliest times to the present and argue that if the earlier policies were myopic because they downsized English in order to promote Bangla and Bangla-centric nationalism, the recent ones are short-sighted because the state's commitments to English weigh heavier than its capacity to



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deliver. However, our main argument in the paper is that ELT policies, which are translated into action through public investment in education, do not substantially represent the complex dynamics that mediate students' English proficiency achievement in rural Bangladesh.

CLT as aid and ELTIP Bangladesh

We start with a brief sketch of the background to the CLT innovation which was a state-imposed curricular intervention. The innovation was jointly funded by the British Department for International Development (DfID) and the Government of Bangladesh. The bilateral venture gave birth to the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP Bangladesh) which had two specific objectives: 1) to produce CLT-based English textbooks for Grades 9–10 at the secondary level and Grades 11–12 at the higher secondary cycle, and 2) to train school teachers and empower them to teach communicative English (Paul, 2004; Hamid, 2005; NCTB, 2001, 2003; Rahman, 2007). According to a two-page government evaluation report (DSHE, 2004), as of 31 October, 2004, 11,737 secondary school teachers had been provided with a 13-day CLT training within the first two phases of ELTIP.[2]

Both objectives of ELTIP were important. New textbooks were required to introduce CLT, the new model of teaching and curricular goal in Bangladesh. Equally importantly, since teachers were the real users of the new ELT model, their training was essential for shifting their orientation to CLT from the old grammar translation-based methodology. Teacher training also needed to be given a high priority because it was mainly on the grounds of teacher unpreparedness that the introduction of CLT was opposed from different quarters (Hamid, 2005). In short, because of the innovation, CLT textbooks replaced old, non-CLT textbooks, and English teachers in some schools received CLT training for 13 days. Beyond these changes, however, English teaching and learning continued in the same classrooms, surrounded by the same external socioeconomic and political realities, with the same learners, and the same generally inadequate facilities.

What kind of CLT was introduced in schools? No matter what the Bangladeshi policy makers think, plan and wish to do, curricular messages are conveyed to schools principally through the textbook. Regarding the innovation, the Preface of the English textbook for Grades 9–10 (*English for Today*) explains:

> The book follows the communicative approach to teaching and learning English in Bangladesh situations. It provides learners with a variety of materials such as reading texts, dialogues, pictures, diagrams, tasks and activities. These materials have been designed and developed for practice in four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. As a result, classes are expected to be interactive with students actively participating in the classroom activities through pair work, group work as well as individual work. (NCTB, 2001)

The CLT-based textbook is the de facto syllabus – it contains all the materials needed for all kinds of activities. Although in theory equal emphasis is given to the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, in reality only the skills of reading, writing and grammar are usually covered in classroom teaching, particularly in rural schools. This is because listening and speaking are not assessed either in school-based or school-leaving examinations and so teachers and learners do not worry about these two essential skills for communicative English (Chowdhury & Farooqi, in press). So, despite the CLT focus of the new textbooks, it can be argued that this focus is ignored, and texts generally are used like the old grammar-translation texts.

Thus although the introduction of CLT marked a significant shift in Bangladeshi ELT in theory, there is little evidence to suggest that the policy brought about any significant changes in teaching practice at the school level, particularly in rural areas. Based on the first author's fieldwork experience in rural schools in a northern subdistrict called Nadiranga,[3] we argue that despite the changes in policies, classroom English teaching in much of Bangladesh has remained basically the same over the last two decades. We draw on insights generated from the first author's interviews with six secondary school English teachers in Nadiranga. These teachers taught English to 10th grade students in six different schools. The interviews were in Bangla, the L1 of all participants including the interviewer, and extensive notes were taken since the teachers did not consent to their interviews being tape-recorded. The semi-structured interviews elicited their views, perceptions and reactions

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to different aspects of their teaching practice, professional development, their own English language proficiency and their knowledge and understanding of CLT. Only one of the teachers had received the 13-day CLT training previously mentioned. All six teachers, including the training recipient, admitted that they did not have a clear idea about or understanding of CLT; nor did they know the 'whats' and 'hows' of implementing it in the classroom for developing learners' communicative competence. That this group of English teachers lacked knowledge and understanding of CLT is probably understandable because most of them did not receive training or education about CLT or any other ELT pedagogy. However, even receiving such training may not guarantee trainees' adoption and application of CLT-based knowledge and skills. The case study of nine secondary English teachers reported in Chowdhury & Farooqi (in press) emphasises this point. Although all nine teachers received CLT training provided by ELTIP, classroom observation and interviews showed that their classroom practice was guided by their own beliefs and experiences of teaching and learning; CLT training had hardly had any impact on their classroom practice.

Taking these details into consideration, one may ask whether CLT can be expected to produce dramatic changes in outcomes in English teaching and learning, as the policies had anticipated. The following section presents some student performance evidence related to this question from the same research project.

10th graders' performance in English

In a study conducted by the first author, the relationships between 10th graders' family backgrounds and their English achievement in Nadiranga, a medium-sized rural subdistrict, were examined. Nadiranga is one of the poorest subdistricts in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2005) with a population of 114,350 (49.4% males, 50.6% females). The literacy rate of the population aged seven and over is 33.47% (the national literacy rate is 45.3%) (BBS, 2005). There are 12 secondary schools in Nadiranga with about 700 10th graders participating in the SSC (Secondary School Certificate) examination every year. English constitutes two of the 11 papers for which all examinees must sit. This school-leaving examination officially terminates the secondary education cycle in Bangladesh.

A total of 228 10th graders were surveyed in Nadiranga for this research. These students were given a 60-point English test designed by the English Teaching Task Force (BEERI, 1976). It has been widely tested in different schools for reliability and validity (Zaman, 1999). Divided into three parts, the test content focused on grammar items in scripted dialogues (30 points), vocabulary items (20 points) and reading comprehension questions (10 points).[4]

The mean score of the students in the test was 25.22 (standard deviation: 8.06, maximum score: 52, minimum: 11) with 80% of the test takers scoring below 50%. Of the 228 students tested, 200 participated in the SSC examination in March 2007.[5] The results of this national examination were published by the Ministry of Education in June 2007 and English grades of these students were collected from their respective schools. It was found that 37% of the sample failed in English. This rate was higher than the national rate of failure in English (30%) in the SSC examination in 2007 (*Prothom Alo*, 2007).

Figure 1 compares students' English grades on the SSC examination and on the proficiency test. The raw scores on the proficiency test were converted into grades following the grading scheme used in the SSC examination. It can be seen that in both measures of English achievement significant proportions of students either failed or obtained only poor grades. Only about 15% to 20% of the students were able to obtain a grade of 3 (B). Importantly, not a single student obtained 5 (A+) in English, the highest grade, in the SSC examination.

The English achievement data presented in Figure 1 covered the skills of reading, writing and grammar. Despite official insistence on communicative English, the skills of speaking and listening, as previously noted, are neither taught nor tested. Student performance data on speaking and listening skills can be generated by giving students special tests. Arranging such tests, however, would require a lot of time, resources and expertise. To get an idea of the 10th graders' spoken proficiency, a sub-sample of 14 students was drawn from the survey sample for the qualitative phase of the research project. While interviewing these students on different aspects of family, social and cultural

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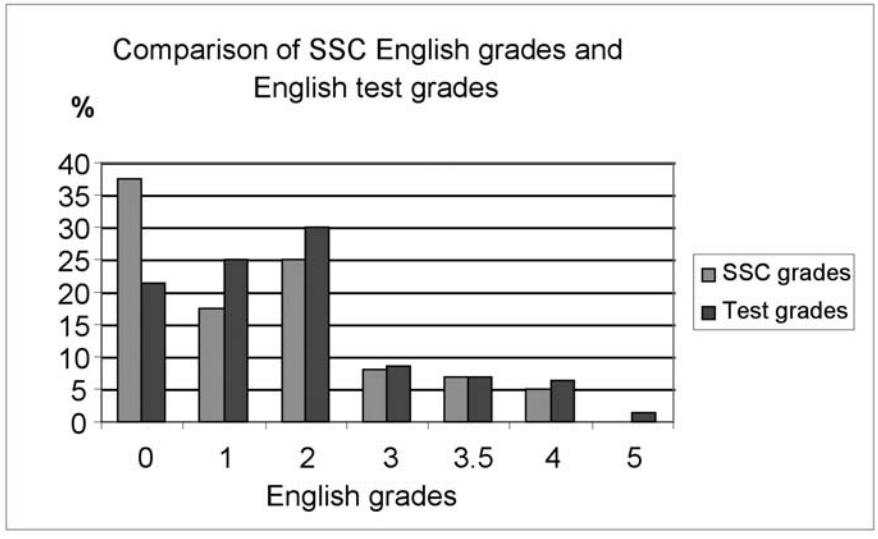


Figure 1: Comparison of students' SSC English grades and English test grades.

capital and their attitudes, motivations, their English-learning experiences, future education plans and career goals in Bangla, the first author also asked them to introduce themselves in English. Except for one or two, the rest of the students could not produce sizable chunks of English sufficient to introduce themselves. Figure 2 presents some transcribed samples of their self-introductions.[6]

These students had studied English for 10 years, beginning from Grade 1, almost all under the CLT national curriculum. English constituted a significant portion of their school curriculum (19% at the secondary level), and it was taught 3–5 hours per week at primary and secondary levels. So, why do so many students still fail in English in the school-leaving examinations? Why have most of them failed to develop minimal proficiency in the language?

Failure in English and national English policies

Poor student performance in English has worried policy makers, educators, teachers and parents over the last three decades. In the 1980s poor learner English was attributed to national English planning in the early 1970s which assigned a diminished role to English. In the early language planning efforts, Bangla, which was spoken by 95% of the population, was given the highest priority because of its crucial inspirational role in the independence

Ramij: I am (complete name). (5.0) I read in class ten. My father name (name of father). (4.0)
Researcher: huh
Ramij: My mother name (name). (3.0) I live in small village. (3.0) I go to school regularly.

(Interviewed on 24.12.06 at 1:45 in their residence)

Neeman: My name is (name). My father name is (name). (2.0) My home-home is a (name of locality). My village (name)-my village (name) is (7.0)
Researcher: huh. Keep going.
Neeman: (4.0) [silence]
Researcher: huh. Keep going.
Neeman: (5.0) [silence]
Researcher: Yes. Please go on.
Neeman: (7.0) [silence]

(Interviewed on 26.12.06 at 12 noon in their residence)

Monir: I am a (…) I am a student. I (…) I am (…) my [nonsense word] [laughs]
Researcher: Take your time to think before you say anything.
Monir: Mane [Bangla word, code-mixing] my I am a student. I am (…) my daily life (…) my (…) I (5.0) bolte parchhi na [Can't say anything, code-mixing]

(Interviewed on 26.12.06 at 2:45 pm in their residence)

Figure 2: Students' self-introductions

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of the country (Khan, 2004; Musa, 1996). It was given constitutional recognition when the independent nation's first constitution was drawn in 1972. Bangla was made the centre of this new nationalism and thus was promoted in every sphere of society. Although not inevitable, the promotion of Bangla was at the expense of English (Musa, 1996; Rahman, 1991, 2007; Rahman, 1999; Hamid, 2006; Baldauf et al., 2007). English thus lost its status as medium of educational instruction, which it had had until 1971, and was now replaced by Bangla at all levels of education:

> Bangla must be used as a compulsory language up to class XII. Textbooks at the higher stages of education, especially in the field of science and technical, professional and vocational education must be written in Bangla and translated from foreign languages at Government expenditure…
>
> (Bangladesh Education Commission Report, 1974, quoted in Khan, 2004, p. 113)

English now became a required subject of study from the secondary level onward. Yet the dethroning of English was not complete until two more policies took effect: 1) the withdrawal of the compulsory study of English for tertiary level students in 1980 (Rahman, 1999, p. 18), and 2) the 'Bengali Introduction Law' of 1987 which made it clear that 'Bengali was to be used in all spheres and at all levels for government purposes' (Banu & Sussex, 2001, p. 126).

Thus English was significantly scaled back in early language-related national policies. It is not clear to what extent it was due to such policies, but the English Teaching Task Force commissioned by the Ministry of Education (BEERI, 1976) found that standards of English were declining at all levels of education:

> The report showed that the English proficiency of students at the secondary levels was lower than that which was assumed by their textbooks. Students of Class IX were two years behind, and students of Class XII four years behind.
>
> (Khan, 2004, p. 114)

A baseline survey which was undertaken by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in 1990 portrayed an equally dismal picture of English proficiency among learners. The survey reported that

> **4.5.1** The majority of students are not attaining satisfactory levels of proficiency, as measured against the requirement of the syllabus and textbooks in use.
>
> **4.5.2**. The situation is particularly serious in non-governmental rural schools, where over 95% students at class 6 and 8 are failing to reach the expected standards of proficiency […] over 70% of these students at class 6 and 80% at class 8 have a command of language which is close to non-existent.
>
> (Cited in Rahman, 1999, p. 16)

Given these depressing findings, policies were put in place to revamp English after this period of neglect. English was introduced as a compulsory subject at the first grade in 1991. It was also reintroduced as a compulsory course at the tertiary level (Hamid, 2000; Rahman, 2007). Moreover, the Government enacted the Private University Act, 1992 which paved the way for the establishment of private universities in Bangladesh. In 2006 there were 53 exclusively English-medium universities (BANBEIS, 2006).

Thus national policies were put in place to revive English and give it maximum space in the national curriculum. Furthermore, the previous methodology of English teaching (developing linguistic competence through grammar-translation method) was replaced by CLT. So, if the early policies had downsized English, more recent ones have extended its space in the national curriculum.

If reduced space of English in the curriculum was the cause of poor student performance in the 1980s, could one now expect improved performance because the space for English had been substantially extended? No studies in the last decade have reported any improvement in the standard of teaching and learning English, as might have been anticipated by the late 1990s policy innovations. As we discuss in the next section, both scholarly views and media coverage continue to express grave concerns about the falling standards of English.

English achievement: public and private investments

We argue that ELT policies in Bangladesh only have had a minimal impact on teaching practice in the classroom and none on testing techniques. It seems obvious that changes that occur at the level of policy may not impact on learner proficiency to any measurable degree unless combined with sustained implementation practices. We develop this argument in this section with some relevant data.

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It is well known that students who fail in English in school-leaving examinations are mostly from rural areas (*Daily Star*, 2007; Deabnath, 2007; Mahmud, 2005; *Prothom Alo*, 2007). The alarming rate of failure of rural students in English is customarily attributed to English teachers and other school factors, as is instanced by the following editorial comment in a national English daily:

> Indeed, when one observes the state of English in Bangladesh, one cannot but be appalled at what has been going on outside the capital. It is especially in the district towns and thanas [subdistricts] the predicament faced by teachers and students alike in the matter of a good teaching of the English language has assumed stark form in recent years.
>
> (*New Age*, 2005)

There is no denying that English taught by unqualified or under-qualified teachers is bound to be unhelpful to students for passing examinations or learning the language. However, we would argue that more crucial factors for student underachievement in English or in other subjects are related to students' home situations. Socioeconomic and cultural in nature, these home factors have been largely denied or ignored in explanations of school failure. In the following paragraphs we argue why home factors are more pertinent than language pedagogy in explaining school success or failure in English in rural Bangladesh.

Our first point relates to educational investment in Bangladesh, from the public as well as private sources. It is the level of public investment in education which affects school infrastructure, teaching materials, teacher satisfaction and, consequently, the quality of teaching and learning. McKay (2002, p. 20) provides some evidence for this with reference to Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica. Although English is a required subject in all three countries, it is only Costa Rica which has experienced growth in the learning of English. She attributes this growth to higher budgetary allocation to education in Costa Rica (33.3%) than in Guatemala (1.7%) or Honduras (3.5%). In the context of Bangladesh, *Education Watch 2006* (CAMPE, 2007) shows that government investment[7] in non-government secondary schools amounts to US$ 2.9 per student per month, which it says is deplorably inadequate. The report also notes that family investment accounts for 71% of the total expenditure for the same level of education. Given the substantially low level of public investment in secondary education, secondary schools can only make modest contribution to student learning with their limited resources. Thus, it seems self-evident that it is private investment in education that influences academic achievement of Bangladeshi students. The larger proportion of secondary students in rural Bangladesh is either poor or disadvantaged; their families cannot afford to make an optimum investment in their education (Ahmad, Hossain & Bose, 2005). Therefore, they do not have access to necessary English books/materials, education supplies, and most importantly, private lessons in English (Deabnath, 2007). As Kennedy & Lee (2008, p. 176) note, '[i]n countries where families pay for the private tutoring that supplements public education, the private resourcing factor may well play a decisive role'.

Data from the first author's research provides some additional evidence to help us understand this problem. The student survey found that over 77% families in a sample of 228 had an income below US$ 67 per month, while 47% of all students reported that their monthly family incomes were below US$ 26. Analysis of variance tests, which examined whether different levels of family income marked differences in 10th Grade students' mean results in the language proficiency test and the national Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, showed that students whose families had higher income levels obtained significantly ($p.<0.001$) higher scores/better grades in English. Like family income, levels of fathers' and mothers' education also produced significant mean differences in the proficiency test and the SSC examination, which favoured those students whose parents had at least a secondary education.

Given the proportion of public finance, infrastructure availability and teacher quality (Haq, 2004), schools in rural Bangladesh by themselves would seem to play a much more minimal role than we might normally expect in fostering student learning in English or other subjects. The sub-sample of 14 students interviewed in the research provides some evidence to support this. The sample included students who were the highest and the lowest performers on the proficiency test as well as on the school-based SSC-qualifying examinations. All these students were pessimistic about the way English was taught in their schools and they

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said they could not rely on schools to learn English or other subjects. The 'failure' of schools led them to obtain private tutoring, which they found more effective and helpful for learning English as well as for passing school-leaving examinations (Deabnath, 2007). In fact, students who could afford private tutoring all the year round said that going to school was 'a waste of time' because they could exploit their time more efficiently if they stayed at home and took private lessons. All 14 interviewees noted that private tutoring in English was an inevitable consequence for them in the context of school failure in English teaching. In fact, the survey found that 75 per cent of the 228 students had taken private lessons in English in Grade 10. However, the quantity, intensity and quality of those lessons depended on family incomes. It was found that some of the interviewees took private lessons in English throughout the year; some others had to be satisfied with these lessons for a month or two, while others could not find the funds for private tutoring even for a month, despite their expressed need, because their families could not afford it. As a mother pointed out during the first author's interview with her daughter:

> If I had some poultry, I could sell eggs and give her the money. She could then pay an English teacher and get some private lessons.[8]

Conclusions

The current trend of economic and social development in Bangladesh (annual per capita income: US$ 411, HDI ranking: 137th, population: 140 million, land area: 1,44,000 sq. kilometres) does not suggest the ability to provide any dramatic increase in public finance of education in the near future. Because of the nation's staggering poverty, it is also unlikely that rural parents will be able to increase their investment in their children's education. In these circumstances, it is hard to see how top-down policy changes to textbook or methodology will change outcomes, as the poor and disadvantaged students, most of whom reside in rural Bangladesh, will be unable to take advantage of such innovations to develop competence in the language. The ELT experience in Bangladesh over the last three decades suggests that the state commitment to more English as represented by its teaching and learning from the earliest grade possible is a great loss of limited curricular space on one hand and limited national resources on the other. Allen rightly warned, '[t]he present state of English language teaching in Bangladesh represents a significant misapplication of human resources, time and money' (Allen, 1994, p. 5 cited in Rahman, 2007, p. 83). The overwhelming presence of English in the Bangladeshi curriculum thus can be argued to be the case of a 'white elephant' which consumes precious national resources but hardly produces any desirable outcomes (Baldauf et al., 2007).

Our discussion in the paper leads to the predictable conclusion that the mission assigned to CLT in the context of ELTIP Bangladesh was a mission that was both unreasonable and unattainable. If there is a real desire behind the rhetoric of improving the standard of English, strengthening human resources and intensifying economic and social development efforts, Bangladesh needs to find the right balance between the breadth and depth of English in the national curriculum. Since quality is the national concern, perhaps English should be introduced a little later in the curriculum (Yasmin, 2005)[9] but in a more intensified form. Importantly, substantially more public resources should be made available during this intensive phase of English teaching. Rural schools and teachers should be given special priority and resource allocations; the disadvantaged students require positive discrimination because it is mainly their failure that tarnishes the so-called national standard of English. ■

Notes

1 Students studying at *madrasahs* (institutions offering a combination of Islamic and secular education) and English-medium schools are not included in this figure of student population.
2 ELTIP is in its third phase now (2005–2009). Only its first phase (1997–2002) was jointly funded by the British DfID and the Government of Bangladesh. The last two phases have been financed by the Government from internal resources. Recently a national daily (*Daily Ittefaq*, December 31, 2007) reported that ELITP was set to crumble under reduced budgetary allocations and inadequate manpower.
3 A pseudonym. The whole country is divided into 464 subdistricts and Nadiranga is believed to be one of the poorest.
4 Giving a reading, vocabulary and grammar test might be questioned because the students were studying a communicative curriculum. However,

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the test was justified on several grounds. First, school-based or national assessments did not assess students' speaking or listening skills. Second, the test content was very similar to that of English papers in the SSC examination. Finally, communicative tests of English were not available in Bangladesh. In fact, this was the only locally produced standardized test for measuring Bangladeshi learners' English proficiency.

5 10th graders have to take the SSC-qualifying examination at the end of the 10th grade. Only successful students in this examination are allowed to take the national school-leaving examination.

6 All names are pseudonyms. […] denotes a pause of 1 second, longer pauses are numbered. The researcher's turns in the conversations were translated into English from Bangla.

7 There are two types of secondary schools in Bangladesh: government and non-government. The vast majority of schools are of the latter type. Although non-government, teacher salaries, school infrastructure and teaching and learning materials – are all provided by the government.

8 The mother was present during the interview with her daughter. She interfered in the interview occasionally which was welcomed by the interviewer.

9 Yasmin (2005) also argued for delayed introduction of English in school curriculum. However, her arguments were based on the Critical Period Hypothesis.

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