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TEACHING AND LEARNING CHALLENGES OF THE PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHERS IN BANGLADESH

Md. Rahat Hossain

*Teacher, Materials Writer & Researcher in English Language
E-mail: rahathossain211@gmail.com*

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Abstract

The present study attempted to examine the practical teaching and learning challenges faced by the primary level English teachers regarding four language skills. The study was consisted of twelve primary school teachers teaching English from twelve different primary schools of Dhaka division and observed twelve classes as well. The result of the findings shows that while teaching English at the primary level, teachers mostly face challenges because of the large and noisy classrooms, impractical textbook for teaching listening and speaking and the exclusion of basic language skills in the tests. Other challenges are the students' use of Bangla in the classroom and their poor background knowledge. This study helps to overcome the remaining challenges faced by the primary level English teachers.

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1. Introduction

As an international and foreign language, English gets great importance in the field of education in Bangladesh. It is taught as a mandatory course in every step of education. Currently, educational system in Bangladesh has four major stages: primary, secondary, higher secondary and tertiary education. The primary level education consists of 5 years of formal schooling (class I-V). Children aged 4 to 5 years normally begin education at this level. This education is normally offered by the government and nongovernment primary schools. Virtually in all primary education systems, language teaching occupies a significant place, and more than 50 percent of the time and effort are spent to teach basic literacy and numeracy (Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991). The English text books of this level have also been developed for the students to learn four language skills through meaningful and enjoyable activities. However, studies, both national and international, indicate that many of the primary graduates are failing to learn language skills effectively (Ahmed et al., 2005). Studies also identify various causes contributing to this low acquisition of basic literacy including unavailability of appropriate and adequate educational materials, trained teachers with modern pedagogic knowledge and adequate contact hours to foster an intellectual climate (UNESCO, 1996). So, the present study wants to explore the pedagogical challenges faced by the primary level English teachers in Bangladesh

As the primary level is the largest and foremost level of education, it needs to get much importance from the prospective of research. Real education begins at this level. The foundation that the students have at this level influence the later phases of education. Though some research works have already been conducted regarding this field, they are not sufficient and to the specific point as the current study focus. This study carries significance because it will give us significant insights about the different issues in teaching English at the primary level. The study has immense possibility to offer teachers with key insights about the usefulness of different techniques for

teaching all the skills of a new language. Furthermore, teachers and learners will get chance to explore their insight through this study.

Teaching English to the students of primary level is a major concern in Bangladesh. It is not very easy to teach English effectively such a large community. It is a continuous process to reach the standard. The present study is designed to explore the real picture of the teaching English at the primary level of our country including curriculum, text and other materials, assessment system and other classroom activities. Based on the topic of the study, the following research questions have been designed to conduct the study:

- a) To what extent is English language taught at the primary level in Bangladesh?
- b) What problems do the teachers face in teaching English language to the students at the primary level?
- c) What problems do the primary level students face while learning English language?
- d) How relevant and sufficient are the materials for teaching English at the primary level?

2. Objectives

The aim of the present study is to identify the problems which English teachers face while teaching at primary level and focus the considerations analyzing the answers of the questionnaires, in-depth interviews and classroom observations. It is important to sketch out the real situation of teaching and learning English at the primary level in Bangladesh that the teachers and the students face.

3. Literature Review

The present study is indeed concerned to examine the challenges faced by the primary English teachers in their entire teaching-learning process. In such cases, Dilruba (2010) previously explored the status of English teaching at the primary level in Bangladesh and identified the major issues and challenges of teaching English at the primary level in Bangladesh and their probable solutions. The study showed that each teacher in both government and registered non-government schools had to take 7-8 classes every day. The findings of the study also showed that most of the students are weak in speaking (rural 52% & urban 60%) and listening (rural 26% & urban 24%) skills. The study strongly recommended providing training to the English teachers. Prithvi (2013) reported on a study that examined Bangladeshi primary school learners' experience of English language classroom practices in which technology-enhanced communicative language teaching activities were promoted through a project called English in Action (EIA). A semi-structured group interview was conducted with 600 Grade 3 students from different regions of Bangladesh. The findings showed that the learners found communicative language learning activities such as dialogue and role play more effective than translation and memorizing grammar rules for learning English, although they enjoyed reciting and drills. The results also showed that these learners' English teachers tended to mix both traditional and communicative approaches in their lessons. The current study also deals with unfolding the real scenario of activities done by the primary school teachers in the classrooms. Barkhuizen (1998) investigated learner perceptions in the context of English as a second or foreign language in a South African secondary school. This study showed that the students perceived the 'mechanical activities' (grammar, spelling and punctuation) to be high ranking language learning activities, a finding which surprised their teachers. In the same way, the present study deals with the students' problems in the complete teaching-learning way at the primary schools in Bangladesh.

4. Methodology

Based on the objectives and research questions, the researcher chose to conduct this study utilizing Mixed Method Approach. The present researcher combined aspects of quantitative and qualitative methods in the stages of data collection and data analysis. Qualitative data was collected from classroom observations. The quantitative data were collected from a questionnaire. The researcher has selected twelve schools located at different districts of Dhaka division. From those schools twelve teachers have been selected for questionnaire survey. The researcher

observed twelve EFL classes in twelve different primary schools of Dhaka division. Upon selection of teachers for the study, specific class sessions were chosen for observation.

5. Findings and Discussion

This chapter deals with interpretation and discussion of the results of the study. The results are presented in two main sections. One section deals with the theoretical results collected by the questionnaire and interview. Another section is about the practical results collected from the observation of teachers' classroom practices and from the textbook analysis. Since the responses were actually on a binary scale, the two categories of 'strongly agree' and 'agree' were collapsed into single category *agreement*, while 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' were collapsed into single category *disagreement* to allow easier discussion of the results. The statements assessing the expected response of the participants were adopted through a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932). On the scale, statements were coded as Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, Neutral=3, Disagree=2, and Strongly Disagree=1.

5.1. The Extent of Language is Taught

This section discusses the findings of the questionnaire survey. The section mainly tries to find out the answer of the questions related to research questions. The first part is mainly involved in investigating the extent of teaching EFL speaking at the primary level.

Table-1: Teaching EFL speaking

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Teaching EFL Speaking	Disagree	2	16.67
	Neutral	4	33.33
	Agree	6	50.00
Conducting group work and pair work	Disagree	3	25.00
	Neutral	4	33.33
	Agree	5	41.67

In response to the first question, 50% (frequency-6) teachers believed that they taught speaking while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 33% (frequency-4) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 16.67% teachers (frequency-2) disagreed. In response to the second question 41.67% (frequency-5) teachers believed that they conduct group and pair work while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 33.33% (frequency-4) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 25% teachers (frequency-3) disagreed.

The second part explores the extent of teaching EFL reading and writing at the primary level. The participants' responses are depicted in Table-2.

Table-2: Teaching reading and writing

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Teaching EFL reading	Disagree	0	0.00
	Neutral	1	8.33
	Agree	11	91.67
Teaching EFL writing	Disagree	0	0.00
	Neutral	2	16.67
	Agree	10	83.33

In response to the first question, 91.67% (frequency-11) teachers believed that they teaching EFL reading while teaching English language at the primary level. In answering to the same question, 8.33% teachers (frequency-2) were neutral. In response to the second question 83.33 % (frequency-10) teachers believed that they teach EFL writing while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 16.67% (frequency-3) teachers chose the *Neutral* option.

Accordingly the third segment dealt with the teaching of listening skill. The percentage of the respondents' opinions is in Table-3.

Table-3: Teaching listening skill

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Teaching EFL Listening	Disagree	4	33.33
	Neutral	5	41.67
	Agree	3	25.00
Inclusion of language skills in the exam	Disagree	9	75.00
	Neutral	1	8.33
	Agree	2	16.67

In response to the first question, 25% (frequency-3) teachers believed that they taught listening while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 41.67% (frequency-5) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 33.33% teachers (frequency-4) disagreed. In response to the second question 16.67% (frequency-2) teachers believed that they include language skills in the examinations at the primary level. Another 8.33% (frequency-1) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 75% teachers (frequency-9) disagreed.

Finally, Table-4 showed the teachers' opinions of using both Bangla and English as the medium of instructions in the classes.

Table-4: Medium of instruction

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Bangla and English as Medium of instruction	Disagree	1	8.33
	Neutral	2	16.67
	Agree	9	75.00

In response to the first question, 75% (frequency-9) teachers believed that they use both Bangla and English as Medium of instructions while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 16.67% (frequency-2) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 8.33% teachers (frequency-1) disagreed.

5.2. Problem faced by the teachers

Table-5: Class duration and sitting furniture

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Insufficient class duration	Disagree	2	16.67
	Neutral	3	25.00
	Agree	7	58.33
Unfriendly sitting furniture	Disagree	2	16.67
	Neutral	2	16.67
	Agree	8	66.67

In response to the first question, 58.33% (frequency-7) teachers believed that class duration was insufficient for teaching English language at the primary level. Another 25% (frequency-3) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 16.67% teachers (frequency-2) disagreed. In response to the second question 66.67% (frequency-8) teachers believed that sitting furniture was unfriendly for teaching English language at the primary level. Another 16.67% (frequency-2) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 16.67% teachers (frequency-2) disagreed.

Table-6: Noisy classroom and large class size

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Noisy classroom	Disagree	2	16.67
	Neutral	1	8.33
	Agree	9	75.00
Large class size	Disagree	1	8.33
	Neutral	3	25.00
	Agree	8	66.67

In response to the first question, 75% (frequency-9) teachers believed that the classroom was noisy while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 8.33% (frequency-1) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 16.67% teachers (frequency-2) disagreed. In response to the second question 66.67.00% (frequency-8) teachers believed that large class size interrupted them to take individual care of the students while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 25% (frequency-3) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 8.33% teachers (frequency-1) disagreed.

5.3. Students' Problem

Table-7: Students' use of Bangla and poor background knowledge

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Students' use of Bangla	Disagree	3	25.00
	Neutral	1	8.33
	Agree	8	66.67
Poor background knowledge	Disagree	2	16.67
	Neutral	1	8.33
	Agree	9	75.00

In response to the first question, 66.67% (frequency-1) teachers believed that students' use of Bangla interrupted them while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 8.33% (frequency-1) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 25% teachers (frequency-3) disagreed. In response to the second question 75% (frequency-9) teachers believed that Poor background knowledge interrupted them while teaching English language at the primary level. Another 8.33% (frequency-1) teachers chose the *Neutral* option. In answering to the same question, 16.67% teachers (frequency-2) disagreed.

5.4. Relevance of Textbook

Table-8: Authenticity of textbook and scope of teaching listening-speaking

	<i>Teacher</i>		
		Frequency	Percentage
Authenticating of textbook	Disagree	3	25.00
	Neutral	1	8.33

	Agree	8	66.67
Scope of teaching speaking and listening in the textbook	Disagree	2	16.67
	Neutral	4	33.33
	Agree	6	50.00

In response to the first question, 66.67% (frequency-8) teachers believed that the textbook they use while teaching English language at the primary level is authentic. Another 8.33% (frequency-1) teacher chose the Neutral option. In answering to the same question, 25% teachers (frequency-3) disagreed. In response to the second question 50% (frequency-6) teachers believed that there is the scope of teaching listening and speaking following the textbook. Another 33.33% (frequency-4) teachers chose the Neutral option. In answering to the same question, 16.67% teachers (frequency-2) disagreed.

Table-9: Scopes of teaching reading and writing

	Teacher		
		Frequency	Percentage
Scopes of teaching reading and writing in the text book	Disagree	0	00
	Neutral	2	16.67
	Agree	10	83.33

In response to this question, 83.33 % (frequency-10) teachers believed that there is the scope of teaching reading and writing following the textbook. Another 16.67% (frequency-2) teachers chose the Neutral option.

5.5. Classroom Observation

The findings represent a clear picture of the classroom organization. Most of the classes were teacher-centered. Students had the minimum participation in the teaching learning process. The classrooms were not well organized in term of involving the students into the communicative activities. The students were not divided into any group or pair in the classroom. Sometimes teachers involved the students into activities but most of them were performed individual by the students. Role plays, simulation, picture description activities, story completion activities, information gap activities, jigsaw activity etc. are very important part of teaching English. Majority of the teachers rarely used role play and picture description activities while teaching English level. Classroom activities actually focused reading and writing. The class duration was 45 minutes. Almost 50% of that was used for checking homework given by the teacher in the previous class.

The researcher observed most of the teachers teaching English language at the primary level used Bangla as a medium of instruction in the classroom. They rarely used English with Bangla while teaching. The researcher also found that the students also used Bangla while communicating with teachers and their fellow classmates. The students were unable to produce correct English sentences even after the researcher requested them to use English in the classroom in some classes. The researcher found while observing the classroom that the class size varied from 25 students to 60 students which was a great problem for the English language teachers. Though sometimes they wanted to involve the students in language learning, large class size caused problem in arranging any fruitful activity. Teachers were unable to arrange pair work or even individual work related to speaking. Because of the big size, they could not communicate with the students effectively because of the buzzing sound created by the students.

Learners' positive attitude towards practicing speaking depends on various factors. Class test, mid-term and final examinations don't include speaking. It has a negative impact on the learners' attitude. The teacher failed to motivate the students discussing the importance of learning speaking which has also negative impact on the learners' attitude to learning speaking. The negative attitude also caused by the classroom environmental issues. The researcher found that the learners use /bangla as a medium of communication among themselves and with the teachers. The teachers tried to motivate the students positively to use English in the classroom and outside the

classroom. But the students were found to be reluctant and shy to do so. In the presence of the researcher, their level of anxiety rose higher. They even could not produce simple English sentences to communicate with others. This situation created a problematic scenario for teachers teaching English.

The sitting furniture in the classroom seemed inappropriate for conducting communicative activities to the researcher. Most of the schools' classrooms are decorated with traditional sitting arrangements including long wood-made unmemorable benches. Students did not have any opportunity to talk to other face to face. The empty space in front of the front benches was narrow and inadequate for conducting simulation and role plays, that empty space was not suitable.

6. Conclusion

The study tried to investigate on the teachers' view, teachers' conducted activities for teaching English language, problems faced by the teachers, solutions they made and their overall performance in teaching English language at the primary level. The findings have already been discussed in chapter five in different sections. Based on the findings it can be said that primary school teachers are really facing different pedagogical problems. So, the government and other respective authorities should take real-time initiative to overcome those challenges.

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