

The lack of cohesion among political parties and the nations' emergence as a monolingual country after liberation adversely thwarted the process of the English language acquisition and learning among students in Bangladesh: an analysis

Muhammad A. Toimoor

Department of English, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet 3114, Bangladesh.

E-mail: toimoor@sust.edu

Abstract

Judged from the two paradigmatic factors: a. lack of cohesion among political parties and b. nation's emergence as a monolingual state, which have propelled English language learning and acquisition to an impasse in the country, the objective of this research paper would be to find out which factor has been a more dominant issue to impede English language acquisition and learning. I would like to discuss the issues against the background of standardized discourses of different American socio-linguistic researchers that would serve as a criterion in this area to find out which factor is dominant and which factor is dormant.

More than a couple of decades ago, in a Singapore based monthly journal called Far Eastern Economic Review an article titled "English in Southeastern Asia is Rotting" was published. This article covered a wide range that is to say that it discussed the shortcomings of English language learning (reading, speaking, and writing) process via existent education system in countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. It further expounded that the residents of these countries are still maintaining Victorian English (syntax, vocabulary, more emphasis on form than content etc.) and that the very process (to acquire it) that they follow is Victorian as well.

While it would be hypothetical for me to assume that this kind of broad generalization can be applied to other countries like India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, I would like to concentrate on one of the two major problems (or both) that, I think, is impeding the English language acquisition and learning among Bangladeshis in general and among the students in particular. The *status quo* of this paper may discharge a *diatribe* on despotic regimes that fed upon the disintegrated political parties, as they spawned, in Randal Collins's words, "warring individuals, but [not] a small number of warring camps [to form] the pattern of intellectual history" that could have played a vital role in a newly freed third world country like Bangladesh to shape its policies of economy, administration, and education.¹ Apart from this queer hindrance, the second issue that put a setback on the nationals' second language acquisition i.e. English is the monolinguality that came along with the hostile and disintegrating deportment of the political parties after its liberation.

Claire J. Kramsch, in her essay "Language Acquisition and Language Learning," opines that government "policy decisions as the maintenance or abolition of bilingual and immersion programs, the restoration of high school and college foreign requirements, and the governance structure of language and literature departments" arise from the research work of the second language acquisition scholars. She further goes on to say that this kind of research helps us comprehend "the links between language, literacy, and socio-cultural identity, as well as the interrelations of foreign language teaching, national interests, and international peace and understanding."² While in Kramsch's opinion the government policies are to be mended by the research works of the second language acquisition scholars, in case of Bangladesh the unscrupulous despots with the aid of their surrogate political parties, without the help of any research work or scholar, made policies that affected the second language (English) learning and acquisition. The implementation of such policies and people's response to them also reflect the country's socio-cultural identity, national interest, and international peace and understanding from a vernacular (Bangladeshi) point of view.

¹Collins, Randall. The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change. Harvard UP, 1998.1.

Bangladeshi inhabitants started learning English as a second language (which was the language of the court) since mid eighteenth century when the East India Company of England deposed the Mogul governor of Bengal and established a colony. The British colonizers' strictly maintained bureaucracy spawned an administrative matrix that never allowed the populace of Bengal to nurture any other political idea or education system other than whatever the colonizers presented before them. Although imperialism is evil, nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that there existed a political serenity and an administrative uniformity in Bengal (now Bangladesh) for two hundred years during the English regime that paved the way for a steady rise of education and the English language learning. Political parties were formed during this period and eventually Indian sub-continent gained its freedom and got divided into two different independent states: India and Pakistan. Bangladesh became a part of Pakistan and remained so for another quarter century. During this time Pakistan was the colonizer and followed a system that is identical to that of the British while the language of government offices was still English. The political parties of Bangladesh were still taking their shapes and quite ineffectual against the military tyrants of Pakistan. English language acquisition and learning did not face a serious threat yet, although the danger was looming. In March 1971, Bangladesh had to go for an armed struggle to gain her independence. By the time she gained her freedom the political parties were already sharply divided in various factions or camps e.g. communists (they were always divided into two flanks: pro-Peking [now Beijing] and pro-Moscow), semi-secular, secular, conservative, or quasi-religious, fundamentalists, etc. The political party that formed the government was semi secular and was highly disdained by other parties. In a newly liberated and nascent democratic country, where its social, cultural, political, and educational institutions are about to be refurbished and re-constructed, the internecine and insidious disharmony that became rife over the socio-political arena of the nation goaded the country to an utter confusion and chaos. It divided the entire nation into many different flanks and led its scholars to be warring individuals under various heads of political thoughts that abstained the whole nation from forming a holistic knowledge that originates from "the most articulate and *reasonable* description of the collective enterprise of scholarship," which is also "the *accurate, simple, and generalizing* description of experience."³ The chaotic ambience that resulted from the existent disharmony among political parties impeded the scholars from establishing collective enterprise of scholarship as well as forming a generalized description of experience in academic and non-academic fields that plays an integral part in all sorts of policy-making via government. Instead of a holistic knowledge what came out of this pandemonium, in Latour's term, as the immediate result "was the emergence of a few vacuum pumps."⁴ The first president of Bangladesh, who became controversial for forming a one-party government and for turning the course of government to a pseudo-communist regime, was a nationalist. He put serious emphasis on implementing Bengali in every stratum of social life, especially in Education to get rid of anything that seemed to him *sheer occidental*. The government eliminated English as a medium of instruction in high school levels (HSC) and circulated a government notification stating that the written language of the files in different government and non-government offices should be strictly in Bengali, a remarkable deviation from the practice that has been followed for two and a half centuries. This created a huge confusion and shortly after this notification was brought about, the president was assassinated for turning into a terrible dictator viz. for betraying the trust of the nation.

The government offices went back to their formal practice, but Bengali as a medium of instruction in high school level remained. An army general that succeeded the first president stayed in power for a short time, but enjoyed a serious popularity for his economic reforms; he was not worried about the education or language. He, however, formed a new political party that came to be known as the conservative party. He was, in turn, assassinated and replaced by another army general. Although this unscrupulous man was very unpopular, nevertheless, his regime lasted for almost a decade, the longest period that any president in Bangladesh has ever had. In order to gain popularity, he tried to draw the attention and sympathy of the party members of the first president (as the followers of his immediate predecessor were his sworn enemies and demanded his instant expulsion) by pretending to fulfill his unrealized dreams. He seemed to have been interested in education in particular. It became the first victim of his debased and insidious propaganda machine. He made it mandatory that texts in government and non-government offices be written only in Bengali, and in no other language. He even went farther than that; he eliminated the study of English language and literature as minors (which were hitherto major subjects) in college levels.

²Kramersch, Claire J. "Language Acquisition and Language Learning." Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures. Ed. Joseph Gibaldi. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 53.

³Schleifer, Ronald. "A New Kind of Work: Publishing, Theory, and Cultural Studies." 180.

⁴ Schleifer 179

In 1997 under the financial support of John Major, the then British Prime Minister of Great Britain, the British Ministry of Education initiated a program called ELTIP (English Language Teaching Improvement Program) that laid a tireless effort to keep the former trend flowing. Yet they gained a modicum of success, as the project ended soon, as ELTIP ran out of fund. In one of their reports on English language learning and acquisition as a second language among Bangladeshi students, they blamed the sluggishness of the government in implementing ELTIP policies and its disinterest in changing the impasse to be the number one problem in this regard.

In an era where every single country is a part of the global village, and every single individual is connected to the rest of the world via websites and cybernetics, this un-conscientious man led the entire course of education to a sheer uncertainty and looming disaster by banning the study of English that is an international language. He got the support of the so-called liberals, as they wanted to form a parliamentary government making him the head of state after perceiving his *good* intention. The conservatives opposed it and asked the *liberals* to conjoin with them and go on to a movement against the tyrant. The liberals on the other hand would act as devil's advocate to go to power and, at the same time, undermine and demonize the conservatives. The existent dictator and his own tyrannical party, the liberals, and even some members of the conservative party simply could not be united on a national issue to protect the interest of the mass.

The science majors in colleges were still studying English texts, as ever-altering science books were published either in the US or the UK and hence were not in Bengali, but the lectures in the classrooms were, and to some extent still are, delivered in Bengali, which created a gap between the texts and the students and led to a dangerous confusion. Since the antiquated, top-heavy bureaucracy controls everything in Bangladeshi, her not practicing English created a heavy impact on the people. In the past during the job interviews, the candidates needed to take the test in English; but now they needed not to. To correspond with the government offices, English was required, which became an unnecessary matter. While it was a conviction that a person with an adequate knowledge in English might have his work done smoothly in offices, the new law turned it to be useless. The experienced instructors in high schools retired and were replaced by a group of people who had just finished the college without reading English language and literature. This new generation of instructors themselves did not know English and hence always discouraged their students to learn English that became more and more important and ubiquitous in international and national economy. The marauding and deceptive selfishness of the third president of Bangladesh that arose from his insatiable desire to remain in power having been unlawfully supported by two or three political parties gave birth to this anomaly that they thought were very *patriotic* and *nationalistic*. The trend that has been in flux for two and a half centuries faced a drastic twist that placed the flow of English language learning on a reverse course.

While the political parties in Bangladesh are supposed to serve the national interest apart from the differences that exist among them, they could not be united against a tyrant who induced this law to gain some cheap popularity to be in power and stabilize his regime, as they lack even an apparent cohesion. The third president tried to provide the message to the people that too *much* emphasis on learning English has a subversive effect, as it eventually *westernizes* the people who learn it and thereafter *contaminates* the national culture and identity. He opined that in order to defy the cultural aggression and reinstate our cultural purity we should thrust aside English language learning in the first place. This is, basically, the resonance of what his first predecessor promulgated.

After he was forced out of presidency, two female prime ministers simultaneously became the head of the government. These two ladies, having been constantly briefed upon by their retinue-trains, proved to be bit more discrete and practical than their predecessors, as they laid effort to bring back the former trend. The ladies succeeded in making English language and literature compulsory minors in college levels, but the medium of instruction remained the same. Besides, in HSC level English stayed as a neglected subject. The government offices that by then got filled up with the officials who did not study English in College levels continued maintaining the files in Bengali. Therefore, the indirect support and encouragement that public and private institutions received from bureaucrats ceased to exist forever. The students having been caught in the middle learned neither Bengali nor English, as learning English actually helps a Bengali speaking person learn his or her language better since he or she can deconstruct his or her language through comparison.

Compared to India where the nationals speak in many languages, Bangladesh is a monolingual country wherein the inhabitants speak in Bengali. In order to communicate, the Indian populace needs to absorb a common language that would connect every single individual over a vast geographical territory. It is, therefore, mandatory for them to take recourse of a language that would generate and ensure mobility in the national arena. From the very start of an individual's life, he or she faces the challenge of communication that eventually

coerces him or her to learn a second language that has universality. Since English has been already an established language, they have nurtured this particular language as *lingua franca* with top priority.

While learning English is an integral part of an individual's existence in India, learning English for a Bangladeshi national is more or less an academic requirement that may play or may not play a vital role in getting jobs provided he or she is solely confined within Bangladesh's geographical territory. A study of her history reveals th⁵at Bangladesh (formerly Bengal) has been almost always a colony and her people were coerced to learn the language of the⁶ colonizers' political, religious, and financial institutions that compelled the Bangladeshi people to learn a second or third language. The English were the last colonizers as well as the strongest, as they not only practiced a political control, but they also controlled the education system and impacted and shaped Bengali literature through the influence of their own language and literature. There is no denying the fact that by reading English literature and language, the patriarchs of Bengali literature formed their concepts and forms of literary writings. Until 80s learning English language was, in fact, a continuation of nation's colonial legacy and a nurturing of an aesthetic object. The practical value of learning it until the nation's merging into a global economy and an internationally acclaimed education system during 90s was little and hypothetical. The lack of the English Language's face value or its financial potential having been coupled with the nation's monolingualness and colonized's recalcitrance made its inhabitants disinterested in learning it.

The absolute monolingualness of the country began since 1971, when Bangladesh gained freedom. Before that, when it was a part of Pakistan or the Indian subcontinent, its monolinguality remained latent, as English was always the medium of communication among the administrators, academics, and businessmen, who came from different parts of India and Pakistan and spoke and wrote in English. Therefore, the natives who interacted with them needed to speak and write in that very language. Bangladesh, as a part still did not feel the full-throttled impact of monolinguality. Efficiency in the English language was a pre-requisite among its nationals at that time to succeed in business, jobs, and in the world of academia. With its liberation, the *status quoante* that existed for centuries went away, and once people became relieved of this burden, they became disinterested in engaging time and energy in learning and practicing English as a second language.

According to Dennis Baron language is a social phenomenon. He explains: "An official language would create a political and cultural bond among Americans of diverse origins . . . Nativists have supported the official English language movement as part of their two-century-old program to curb immigration and keep the United States ethnically homogeneous."⁷ The reason of laying emphasis on practicing one language that the Nativists of the US internalized is basically the same (no matter how hypocritical it is) that the Bangladeshi rulers exposed in front of the people of that country. They eliminated English from high schools and colleges raising the issue of cultural *contamination* although they needed not to worry about the influx of immigrants.

The government talked about the "political and cultural bond" that needs to be achieved through the practice of Bengali in every stratum of social life. But this political and cultural bond was never achieved, as the despots had to go from power; instead the immediate outcome of banning English was that the standard of Bengali, the principal language, witnessed a steady decline, as Baron states: "The question of Language variety leads inevitably to the question of standard language, the spoken or written dialect of a distinct class of language users that in many societies is promoted by schools and the culture in general as model to be emulated by all."⁸ Bengali language's standard in pre-liberation era was maintained by the academics, scholars, and the writers who spoke and wrote in both the languages; now with only one in hand, they thought that job has already been done. They seemed to have ignored the idea that language as a social phenomenon evolves with other social factors and there has to be always a second language at hand to spawn relativity.

Kramsch is of the opinion that "Foreign language pedagogy has long been guided, directly or indirectly, by theories of language and learning."⁹ Cultivation of these "theories" gives birth to different methods and approaches that help the learners acquire a second language in an effective and pragmatic fashion. After Bangladesh has been liberated and turned into a monolingual state, study and practice of such "theories" diminished, as the new generations of scholars in academia became disinterested in the whole process because

³Schleifer, Ronald. "A New Kind of Work: Publishing, Theory, and Cultural Studies." 180.

⁵ Schleifer 179⁵

⁶

⁷Baron, Dennis. "Language, Culture and Society." Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures. Ed. Joseph Gibaldi. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 34.

⁸Introduction to Scholarship 34

⁹Introduction to Scholarship 53

of the lack of patronization from the government. Study and practice of theories became confined within a small group of people, who taught and studied English and American literature as majors in different public universities and colleges. Their will and paper works remained vastly ineffectual as in Collins' words: "Economic and political macro-structures do not explain much about abstract ideas [and do not get much affected by it either], because such ideas exist only where there is a network of intellectuals focused on their own arguments and accumulating their own conceptual baggage train."¹⁰ What Kramersch terms as the "methods of discourse analysis"¹¹ that the language acquisition scholars use for analyzing the production of public discourses came to a halt, as English as a medium of public discourse was prohibited by law. Kramersch further extends her view by saying that language is a social practice, and therefore, once the practice is obliterated, language acquisition becomes almost impossible. It is also important to know about the culture and ethnography of the people whose language the learners are learning as a second language. Militant nationalism generated by so-called patriotic dictators demonized the culture and ethnography of the English speaking nations, especially the Great Britain for its imperialism and the US for playing a controversial role during Bangladesh's independence war by supporting the Pakistanis and for acting as an international policeman. What Kramersch terms as "learning perspective"¹² was thwarted to almost an irretrievable extent.

Apart from the intellectual and cognitive abilities, the factor that "involves the interaction of the learners with the environment"¹³ became non-existent in the post-liberation ear, as the second language learners were separated from a multicultural setting and got stranded on a homogeneous land of staunch monolinguality that looks upon foreign cultures or multiculturalism as insidious and hostile. The intellectual and cognitive abilities to muster knowledge, abstract ideas, and its implementations to achieve *racial superiority* were impeded, as, in Collins' word; the very "rivalries" that exist in a multicultural environment was abolished.¹⁴ Second language learning as a social and psychological activity faced a serious setback, as an absolute concentration was laid on monolingualty of the state to retrieve its *subsumed* culture.

With the social proximity that existed as *status quo ante* being vanished the speakers of Bengali started finding English language learning to be more difficult than before. The "speech adjustments"¹⁵ that native speakers do when they interact verbally with non-native speakers or learners could not be performed any longer, as the non-native speakers became unavailable. With the shift of the social variables, and the elimination of what Leslie M. Beebe and Kathleen Bailey have termed as "risk taking," "Competitiveness and anxiety of [second] language learning" due to nation's turning into a monolingual state, the situational factors, attitude, and motivation to learn a second language, therefore, underwent a drastic change. In answer to the question: what kind of learning conditions assist or impede a second language acquisition, Kramersch responds that "learning a language means not only learning forms and structures but learning how to use these forms accurately and appropriately in various "social settings," which is an essential pre-requisite for the acquisition of a second language. Even the classroom environment became unfavorable for second language learning, as the study of English language and literature or delivering lectures in that language became prohibited.

Literature majors who were still studying English remained incomplete, as they only studied grammar, built vocabulary, and read a few pieces of prescribed texts. N. Candlin argues that "knowing a foreign language means having the ability to express, interpret, and negotiate intended meanings, a definition that goes far beyond using the right grammatical rule or the right item of vocabulary."¹⁶ A social or at least a proper classroom setting is required to be able "to express, interpret, and negotiate intended meanings;" Bangladeshi students, having been impeded from getting the setting or environment and lacking a culturally relevant schemata, could not achieve an effective and fruitful result. As they felt themselves socially very much distanced, they became another example of Alberto whom Schumann tried to teach English, but could not as he felt socially distanced from the target language community.¹⁷ Based on knowledge of vocabulary and grammar alone, the second language learners cannot expect themselves to be understood by others; conversational understanding depends on some social rules that emanate from the cultural openness and educational internationalism of a society. Meaning is embedded not in deciphering another language nor does it lie in the word for word translation of

¹⁰Collins 2

¹¹[Introduction to Scholarship](#) 53

¹²[Introduction to Scholarship](#) 54

¹³[Introduction to Scholarship](#) 58

¹⁴Collins 2

¹⁵[Introduction to Scholarship](#) 62

¹⁶[Introduction to Scholarship](#) 63

¹⁷Kramersch refers to a researcher named Schumann and cites the example of Alberto on page 67 of [Introduction to Scholarship](#).

another language, it relies heavily on forming connections, building inferences, and drawing conclusion, and establishing the accurate schemata.

Randall Collins is of the opinion that “Individuals are nodes in networks of social interaction,” which is considered to be central to the learning process.¹⁸ The learners interact with their peers, teachers, native speakers, and written texts. According to Gardner and Lambert, there are two factors that is to say attitudinal and motivational, which determine a second language learner’s success or failure. Motivation is divided into two sorts: instrumental and integrative. While instrumental motivation that originates from an individual’s seeking a career, reading or comprehending some technical materials or his or her moving to a target country, integrative motivation arises from one’s intention to “integrate within the culture of a second language group or to be a part of that society.”¹⁹ The second motivation leads a learner to a better success in acquiring a second language. Giles and Byrne go even further than that and argue that motivation, societal context, and a learner’s objectives in that context are three salient aspects that function behind a person’s acquiring a second language. A learner needs to form an interrelation between his or her first and second language and fit this to their immediate and long-term communicative needs. If language is a social phenomenon then communication “is an unavoidably social operation and at the same time an operation that is necessarily set in motions wherever social situations are formed.”²⁰ Judged from above viewpoints the second language learners of Bangladesh clearly lacked motivation, societal context, objectives, and above all a congenial communicative system because of an unsettling political and economic structure. They obviously lacked the communicative competence that Finegan has brought about, as it depends on the “speakers as members of communities, as incumbents of social roles, and . . . their use of language to achieve self-identification and to conduct their activities.”²¹ As a result, the students, who studied English, had almost no opportunity to rephrase, restructure, and reorganize the content and the form of dialogues and readings, as they lacked a proper communication system and communicative competence.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book titled The Tipping Point, has explained that things can happen all at once; little changes can make a huge difference and a small number of people work on this machination.²² We always expect everyday change to happen slowly and steadily, and intend to find some relationship between cause and effect. This, however, is not the way things work in human societies. The onslaught of monolinguality, militant nationalism, and despotic regime all came together, instantaneously and brought a drastic change in Bangladesh’s political, societal, and education structures that resulted in impeding its general populace and students from learning English as a second language. In Collins’ word, “The history of philosophy [or ideas] is to a considerable extent the history of groups . . . nothing but groups of friends, discussion-partners, close-knit circles that often have the characteristics of social movements.”²³ The scholars and academics of Bangladesh are vested with a serious responsibility to initiate these “social movements” that are likely to improve the present second language learning process by replacing the existent “vacuum pumps” among them and propagating “the cult of genius or intellectual-hero.” The present discourse may serve as an avant-garde in locating the two major factors that are hindering the second language acquisition process on the part of Bangladeshi students and the mass, as the knowledge it produces “in terms of its coherence, simplicity, and correspondence to empirical *fact*” can be disseminated through further research, and publication and thereby form what Schleifer terms as “aestheticized knowledge.”²⁴ It is quite difficult to categorize the hindrance of learning English as a second language to any of the problem binaries: lack of cohesion among political parties and monolinguality. A careful and pragmatic research work can only find that out. As for now what we should have in mind is that “errors should be viewed not as regrettable mishaps but as necessary steps in the learning process.”²³

Submitted: 24th July, 2007; **Accepted for Publication:** 10th august, 2009.

¹⁸Collins 2

¹⁹Introduction to Scholarship 65

²⁰Luhmann, Niklas. “What is Communication?” Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity. Stanford UP, 2000. 157.

²¹Finegan, Edward. “Language, Languages, and Linguistics.” Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures. Ed. Joseph Gibaldi. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992. 7.

²²Gladwell, Malcolm. The Tipping Point. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2002.

²³Collins 3

²⁴Schleifer 186