

THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The state of English in Bangladesh in the twenty-first century is indeed all-embracing. The use and role of English in media, press, education, commerce, and industries, courts, information and technology, national and international communication signify that English is a highly functional language in this country. Such exhilarating linguistic circumstance of English raises a very significant linguistic issue: How and why has English become very pragmatic in the life of the people in Bangladesh. This article attempts to answer this question from a historical perspective. It analyzes the use and spread of English in Bangladesh since independence in 1971. It also gives evidence of the presence of English in the important domains of national life. Finally, the paper concludes with some recommendations towards bringing effective language policies that will remove the confusion regarding language use and allow people to use English for development purposes.

KEYWORDS: *Historical Legacy of English in Bangladesh, Spread and Use of English in Various Domains, Language Policy and English, The Future of English*

Article History

Received: 22 Aug 2017 | Revised: 20 Mar 2018 | Accepted: 27 Mar 2018

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the English language was in a state of rising and fall in Bangladesh since independence in 1971. (Banu & Sussex, 2001a; Moniruzzaman, 2009; Rahman, 2005; Rahman, 2012). Immediately after the independence, the use of English was suppressed as a sense of high nationalism was working among all the Bengalis. It was apprehended that the promotion of other languages would affect the enrichment of Bangla, the national language. At times, there were policies such as the 'Bangla Promulgation Act 1987' that dictated that Bangla would be used everywhere, whereas English and other foreign languages would be practically absent. The policies could lessen the use of English. However, English remained dormant and spread with a very subtle but stable and gradual mode. Finally, the linguistic scenario changed when the whole world became a global village and English became the most influential global and international language. At that time the more Bangladesh got connected with the modern and global scientific, technological and commercial affairs, the higher the importance of English became. English language education got high importance as English was perceived to be the language of development for both personal and national developments (Erling et al, 2012.) As a consequence, presently English pervades all and every sphere of the personal and national levels.

The authors of this article, argue that the present condition of English is a result of its historical legacy and consistent in the people's personal and national levels. They also bring forth some special linguistic clashes and misperceptions concerning the use of Bangla and English: why and how English has spread so much in Bangladesh? Why the language policies, highlighting 'Bangla Everywhere' has not worked in the real life? Is the widespread use of English at present a threat to the enrichment of the national language Bangla? Should this spread of English be stopped or encouraged and legalized? They believe in the end that these linguistic clashes should be immediately controlled through a very pragmatic language policy that will take Bangla to an esteemed position and promote a standard way of using English as a language of development.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first section narrates a history of how and why English has spread in Bangladesh *in a very surprising way* since independence. It will also expose the nature and consequences of the historical spread in various domains of national life. The second section *discusses the dynamics between Bangla and English that goes on and on despite the state policies to overturn English*. It will also bring forth the prevailing attitudes, conflicts, and confusions regarding the use and role of Bangla and English in the people's lives. Finally, the paper concludes with some recommendations towards the language policy makers and the lawmakers to take the language issue with a practical perspective and to introduce a delicate and friendly language policy that neither hinders the developments through taking English language education nor affects the enrichment of the national language Bangla.

WHY AND HOW HAS ENGLISH SPREAD IN BANGLADESH HISTORICALLY?

Bangladesh achieved independence from Pakistan in 1971 after a nine month long liberation war. Language was a prominent reason behind the outbreak of the war situation. The inception of the linguistic conflict dated back in 1952 when the then Pakistani government declared Urdu to be the national language of the country. The Bengalis in the East Pakistan protested against this declaration because the vast majority of the whole Pakistan spoke Bangla. Therefore, they came out and formed a serious demonstration against the declaration. Many laid down their lives in this protest when the armies fired them and cashed them. This incident later turned into a national issue and resulted in the outbreak of a war against the West Pakistan government in 1971. The war ended in 16th December, 1971 with the hilarious independence of Bangladesh as a new nation. Soon after the independence, language policy was introduced that declared Bangla to be the state language and eliminated Urdu. Consequently, Urdu disappeared. Likewise, English which was an official language in then the Pakistan before the liberation war, lost its official status, but remained dormant in the country and continued to spread with a gradual and subtle pace. However, a strict measure was taken against the English in 1987 by the then government. The government vowed to establish the supremacy of Bangla over all languages and therefore, introduced the 'Bangla Promulgation Act, 1987' which was designed to establish 'Bangla everywhere' and eliminate all uses of English. This was the act that could diminish English almost altogether. However, a decade later at the beginning of the twentieth century, the importance of English was again sensed in Bangladesh as it became the language of globalization. Therefore, the government focused on English language education and made it a compulsory subject from primary level to the tertiary level of education. Besides, other sectors such as business, employment, information and technology have promoted English to a very auspicious level.

Below we will look at the scenario in details:

ENGLISH AND EDUCATION

In education, English rejoices its increasing appeal to a vast number of educators and learners. Learners are instrumentally motivated towards acquiring English language proficiency for a number of reasons: to access global resources of knowledge, information and technology, to succeed in academic examinations, to get a job, to study abroad etc (Hamid, 2010; Mahroof, 2016; Rahman, 2005).

Since 1978, English has been taught as a compulsory subject from primary school onwards after the introduction of the new curriculum by the National Advisory Council of Education. The aim of the language teaching and learning is to promote Bangladeshi people as communicatively competent in English to get access to the modern opportunities. In Bangladesh there are three education sectors, from primary level to higher secondary level, Bangla medium, English medium and madrasa education. Bangla medium education is divided into two- government schools and kindergartens. Government schools have two English language compulsory subjects, whereas kindergartens have more English subjects. English medium schools use English as the medium of instruction and have a number of subjects of English language and literature. Although Madrassas put very less emphasis on English, yet they have two compulsory subjects of English. At the tertiary level, the country has two mainstream line of education: public university and private universities. The private universities have fully English medium system. They use English as the medium of instruction and there is at least one or two basic English language courses for students of all disciplines. Also, they have a distinct English language department for teaching English language, literature and linguistics. In the recent time, some private universities have opened Language institutes such as the North South University has the 'Institute of Modern Languages (IML)' where they have English language courses for students, professionals and for many other learners with different language learning purposes. The public universities use both Bangla and English as a medium of instruction. Students can choose either Bangla or English books for academic study and examination. They have also English language departments and language institutes. Students of these educational institutes are now encouraged to speak English in both classroom and outside classroom with whoever they can so that they become fluent speakers and competent in communication before they enter the competitive job market. Thus, English has high esteem now in the education sector.

ENGLISH AND EMPLOYMENT

English is seen as a very potential language for getting employed now in Bangladesh. Multinational companies Grameen Phone, private banks such as DBBL and Prime Bank, private companies like Navana Group, Builders like Rupayan etc. all recruit candidates with high level of English language proficiency. Job advertisements often ask for people having an excellent command over written and spoken English. Since all official works are now done on the computer and the language is often English for online communication, the employers require candidates who have very good typing skill in English. For this reason, job seekers who have not yet developed English language skills rush to the English language centers such as 'S@ifur's' English language center and the computer centers 'Vuyian Computer Academy' that teach typing in English. Now, people are learning English with much gusto and force for employment purposes.

ENGLISH AND THE JUDICIARY

English is still used in the supreme and high courts. Reports have revealed that even lawyers announce a verdict in English. Although there is a law to use Bangla in the courts, the lawyers seem to be reluctant to use Bangla in high court agenda (Ferdousi, 2015). They use English in all the sensible tasks of the courts.

For this, the lawyers and the judges need to be very efficient in English to conduct their verdicts and cases.

ENGLISH AND MEDIA

Researchers have noted that in media English is randomly used nowadays. First of all, there is already an established speech style in radio station Radio Jockey (RJs) which the researchers called the 'FM Banglish' speech style. The RJs use this style extensively while they run the radio programmes as they conceive that this reveals their social status, education, and smartness. In this style, there is a mixing of Bangla and English words and frequent switch from Bangla to English sentences and vice versa. Their Bangla pronunciation is also influenced by English accent. (Ahmed and Tinny, 2013; Basu, 2009). In advertisements, billboards, signboards, posters, banners, etc. English words and expressions are inserted as a strategy to attract customers and consumers towards the products (Banu and Sussex (2001b). In television, the speech of actors and actresses in drama serials, movies, etc is organized around Bangla and English expressions. English is used wherever necessary and important for linguistic attraction of the audience. In talk shows and programmes, the anchors and presenters try to insert English words whenever they wish because they feel it reveals their linguistic skills as well as their status and prestige (Begum, 2015).

ENGLISH AND BILINGUALISM

There are frequent instances of bilingualism between Bangla and English among the modern Bangladeshi people. Researchers and linguists have revealed reports on code switching and code mixing between Bangla and English in various domains of life, such as classrooms (Begum, 2012), offices (Alam, 2006), among young and adults (Sultana, 2014), students and professionals (Rahman, 2012) and so on.

Students of all ages in all educational institutions are now characterized bilinguals. While they speak with teachers, friends and classmates, they tend to use English words in their speech so as to appear smart, brilliant and competent in communication. Teachers also use English words and expressions in and out of the classroom as a matter of obligation if it is English medium institutions and if not as a matter of impressing the students. Alam (2006) reported that in multinational companies, banks, NGOs, the white-collar professionals mix English words in their Bangla speech to signify their prestige, status, to attract the staffs and to score good performance record. Sultana (2014) showed that there is emerging bilingual youth group who frequently use Bangla and English their speech and will soon contribute to the creation of a distinctive speech pattern of the young generation. They are fluent bilinguals and by this, they indicate their status, linguistic superiority, and skills, prestige and power relations. Rahman (2012) found that bilingualism and code switching has achieved a welcoming state among the people. They accept it as a marker of social identity, prestige, class, and power. Banu and Sussex (2001b) showed evidence of hybridization of Bangla and English words in the advertisements and billboards as a strategy of the companies to attract the consumers towards their products.

ENGLISH AND THE CONFLICTS AND CONFUSIONS

The issue of language in Bangladesh is interesting, conflicting, and confusing. Bangla is the state language constitutionally and officially whereas English is not an official language. However, there is a discrepancy in this law. English is predominantly used in many important spheres of national and public life. In some cases, it overshadows Bangla and in other cases, it has significant use and role for the purpose of communication (Basu, 2016, Khan, 2012, Siddiqui, 2009).

English is officially a foreign language, but it unofficially takes the status of a second language because over the years, the prominence of English rose and rose continuously. This is reflected in the studies of researchers, linguists and ELT specialists who have extensively focused on the conflict between the language policy and the existence of English in Bangladesh. Some are in favor of the spread and frequent use of English in Bangladesh and consider English to be a means of achieving global opportunities (Banu and Sussex, 2001a, Islam, 2011, Kirkwood, 2013, Rahman, 2005, Erling et al, 2012). They regard English to be a highly functional and prospective language in the present world and encourage effective English language education in Bangladesh. They think that the language policies have proved wrong practically since the spread of English is a historical legacy and it is an idealistic view to suppress English because English is all surpassing they suggest that the government needs to introduce language policies that focus on the practical language needs and expectations of the people of the country. On the other hand, many regrets that after many years of independence, we could not ensure the use of Bangla everywhere. They have raised questions regarding why English is still used in the higher judiciary instead of Bangla, why official works and documents are not done in Bangla in both government and private organizations, why the media exposes a language that is completely haphazard in mixing Bangla and English. They consider the mix of Bangla and English as a pollution to our mother tongue. They denounce the frequent and random use of code mixing and switching between Bangla and English and suggest that speakers should use standard Bangla in everyday situations and in all other domains except where English is necessary to use and might be an obligation. They predict that if such bilingual instances continue and they become a regular speech pattern of the people, it will affect our language and hinder the enrichment and the spread of Bangla. Ferdousi (2015) regrets that, 'The usage of 'Bangla' is yet to be made compulsory in all the courts of Bangladesh including the Supreme Court. Although 62 years have elapsed from the Language Movement and 43 years have passed since the independence and several Government office orders have been announced regarding the use of 'Bangla' yet it could not be ascertained in all public sectors. 'She also adds, 'Many suggestions were made by the Law Commission in 2011 regarding the 'Bangla Promulgation Act 1987' but no efficacious attempt was taken to materialize it. After the amendment of the Supreme Court (High Court Division) Rules 1973 in 21 November 2012, the opportunity of using 'Bangla' has been created, but hindrances to use Bangla in the Higher Courts were noticed. As a result, English has become an integral language in the decisions of the Higher Courts.'

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper shows that the surprising spread of English in Bangladesh is due to its historical legacy in this land. It is a highly functional language that has offered global opportunities to the Bangladeshi people all through the years. Although the post-colonial anti-English sensibility worked among the people for a long time and even laws were designed to stop the spread of English, English never disappeared rather it has been very much coexistent with Bangla. Bangla is still the language of the nation and resides in the hearts of the Bengalis. But this has not overshadowed English. Rather English came back again and again with more and more potentials for the country people. Now, people understand that English is a language for business, technology, employment, study and so on. It is a language of higher possibilities, i.e. it can bring a job for a poor but educated unemployed person. Unfortunately, there are still confusion and tensions in the air regarding the use of Bangla and English in various domains and the government is yet to introduce a suitable and practical language policy that will truly work for the people. Going against English and trying to establish Bangla everywhere might not be a wise language decision. Rather, it will be wise to specify particular domains for both Bangla and English. It is also important to explain what kind of speech pattern will be useful in a standard language development.

It should be clearly stated whether the emergence of bilingual speech patterns will be beneficial, whether media should limit the mixing of languages in random ways etc. the spread of English in Bangladesh is neverending. It is ongoing. We need to look at it positively and acknowledge the way it is benefitting us for a long time. Possibly, the random instances of bilingualism will be harmful to a healthy use of both the languages. However, if we use it with care, decency and with a standard pattern, then definitely English will be the most useful and functional language in Bangladesh. Then, it will be possible to exploit the global opportunities that English can offer. Rather than undermining English, we should look at its potentials and find out ways of using it the best way possible.

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