

## IN QUEST OF THE MARGINALIZED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS: A QUALITATIVE EXPEDITION

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### ABSTRACT

In the context of the present research, the “Marginalized English Language Skills” means the English language skills that have been neglected or overlooked in the education system of Bangladesh, namely the listening, speaking and pronunciation skills. This study will particularly focus on the teaching of the marginalized English language skills via informational technology at the tertiary level (i.e. private and public universities). There is sufficient literature from Bangladesh to support that these skills are indirectly or directly overlooked in the education system (see Abedin *et al*, 2009; Alam & Sinha, 2009; Akter, 2005, 2007, 2008; Alam, 2006; Amanullah, 2007; Bhattacharjee, 2008; Hasan, 2000; Jahan, 2008; Mahfuz & Flora, 2009; Maniruzzaman, 2006, 2008, 2010; Mostafa, 2010; Afreen, 2011; Akhter, 2011; Mumeneen, 2011; Ghani, 2011), despite their relevance in the real world—job sector, higher studies, international conferences, etc.

**KEYWORDS:** Marginalized English Language Skills, Pronunciation Skills.

### INTRODUCTION

#### MARGINALIZED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

There is substantial literature from outside Bangladesh to suggest that the above skills are neglected in the education systems of other societies (see Kong, 2011; Lu, Hou and Huang, 2010; Xiaoxian & Yan, 2010; Lee, 2011; Xian-long, 2009; Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Bahns, 1995; Bailey, 2004; Brindley, 1998; Buck, 2001; Ducasse & Brown, 2009; Gardner, 1998. Gardner, 2001; Ginther, 2002; Hughes, 2005; Imhof, 1998; Kondo-Brown, 2004; Lynch, 1995; Lynch, 1997; Lynch, 1998; Mendelsohn, 2001; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004; Vandergrift, 2007). So far, each of the neglected skills has been studied individually or in pairs (e.g. listening and speaking); all three of the neglected skills have never been studied together, particularly in Bangladesh. In the context of this research, they have been collectively termed as the marginalized English language skills or MELS in short. In general, MELS are either not taught at all or are not taught properly, because of which students seem to be incompetent in English listening, speaking and pronunciation skills.

Though a generalization, it seems that owing to the skill-based nature of the contemporary world, people with need-based English language skills particularly in EFL/ESL (English as a foreign/second language) countries, who can perform job-specific tasks, are sought-after. Such need-based language skills are becoming a necessity in academia, particularly in instructions of higher learning where the

medium of instruction is English. The present education system in Bangladesh—primary to tertiary—seems to focus on two English language skills, namely reading and writing, while the need-based skills, which I will call the marginalized English language skills (hereafter, MELS), seem to be neglected or overlooked in the public education system. The dearth of information in the area of the neglected need-based English, particularly the marginalized English language skills necessitates a research of this nature.

### **PROBLEM STATEMENT: CRITICAL IMPLICATION**

Crystal (2009) says that listening is the ‘Cinderella skill’ among the four English language skills. In the Bangladeshi context it seems as reading and writing are the patriarchy skills while listening, speaking and pronunciation are the marginalized English language skills, as they are not emphasized in the education system—primary to tertiary—in a pronounced manner. With regard the new syllabus for secondary and higher secondary levels, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, Bangladesh, (1995) states, “the English language syllabus aims to focus on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as learner-centred activities within communicative contexts. However, since listening and speaking skills are not evaluated in the National Board exams, they are not emphasized in the classroom. Usually the English teachers are more concerned with the teaching of exam-oriented skills, namely, reading, writing and translation (Haque, *et al*, 1997).

Whether entering the professional world (corporate and/or academic), venturing beyond the borders of Bangladesh to pursue higher studies, or present in international conferences and seminars, possessing good English language skills, particularly the marginalized ones like listening, speaking and pronunciation, may provide a lifeline between success and failure. In a country like Bangladesh, generally English reading and writing skills are emphasized in primary, secondary and higher secondary education, while skills like listening, speaking, and pronunciation seem to be marginalized, consciously and/or subconsciously.

Very few public universities in Bangladesh offer English language skills, especially to students other than those from the English Department. Since the medium of instruction of every private university is English, they are supposed to offer English language skills. In other words, due to the need of the market, private universities in Bangladesh seem to be offering market-oriented programmes, courses and skills. As their medium of instruction is English, it means that by the time a graduate enters the professional world, that is, the job market, he/she is quite competent in English. At least that is what he/she is supposed to be. The medium of instruction in public universities is predominantly *Bangla*, but they are realizing the significance of English and have started to introduce Basic English language skills. However, whether the marginalized English language skills, despite their market need in the real world, are actually taught, and if so, emphasized, in public and private universities, remain to be investigated in the context of Bangladeshi higher education.

Traditional higher education in Bangladesh generally entail the development of knowledge via two skills, whether in *Bangla* or English, namely, reading and writing, while listening, speaking, pronunciation, and presentation skills tend to be marginalized. Recent studies (see Afreen, 2011;

Maumeen, 2011, Akhter, 2011; Ghani, 2011), implicitly and/or explicitly seem to imply that the above MELS are not only neglected in the curriculum of the universities of Bangladesh, but also suggest that such skill are generally not taught appropriately in the few universities that do have them in their syllabi. However, in the job market, whether corporate or teaching, listening, speaking, and pronunciation skills seem to be of paramount importance.

### **RAISON D'ÊTRE**

English, due to its utilitarian and pragmatic value, seems to be sought after in the EFL and ESL countries. However, besides reading and writing, the other need-based English language skills like listening, speaking and pronunciation tend to be less emphasized and/or overlooked in the education system of Bangladesh. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to give a glimpse of the of the need-based English language skills that are marginalized in the Bangladeshi institutions of higher learning.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The general objective is to create awareness regarding the marginalized English language skills such as listening, speaking and pronunciation, in academia in Bangladesh. The specific research objective of this investigation are as follows:

- to explore the marginalized English language skills (MELS) that are not emphasized in the public and private educational institutions, particularly the institutions of higher learning in Bangladesh;
- to describe whether such MELS skills have pragmatic needs in the real world—that is the, job market (corporate, Government, academic), higher studies, etc.
- to elucidate how the MELS could be emphasized in the institutions of higher learning in Bangladesh.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF A QUALITATIVE EXPEDITION**

The significance of this study may be considered from two broad perspectives—practical and theoretical. The practical consideration has the potential of having a direct impact on higher education in Bangladesh, while the theoretical significance is more of an implicit nature.

The outcome of this study could pave the way for the private and public universities, the teaching/learning of the marginalized English language skills such as listening, speaking and pronunciation. In particular, the teaching community would benefit as they would be able to impart certain pragmatic English language skills to students who are about to enter the professional world (whether teaching or corporate), or go for higher studies. Such need-based English language skills would provide them with a real opportunity of securing employment in an ever competitive glocal job market, as well as providing a solid platform for furthering their higher studies in foreign universities.

The theoretical benefits of this research are also significant. The findings would strengthen the existing contextual literature (see Abedin *et al*, 2009; Alam & Sinha, 2009; Akter, 2005, 2007, 2008;

Alam, 2006; Amanullah, 2007; Bhattacharjee, 2008; Hasan, 2000; Jahan, 2008; Mahfuz & Flora, 2009; Maniruzzaman, 2006, 2008, 2010; Mostafa, 2010; Afreen, 2011; Akhter, 2011; Mumeneen, 2011; Ghani, 2011) regarding the neglect of the teaching of the need-based English language skills—listening, speaking, pronunciation—in the Bangladesh education system, particularly in the institutions of higher learning. The scholarship implications of this research would help educators, academics, researchers and students to write research papers and dissertations, as well as to carry out further studies in this field. Policymakers and administrators of educational institutions, Ministry of Education or monitoring bodies like UGC of Bangladesh, could draw upon the findings of a qualitative study of this nature to support and strengthen particular decisions with regard to educational reforms in Bangladesh, particularly in terms of teaching the neglected English language skills in the institutions of higher learning.

### DECLINE OF ENGLISH IN BANGLADESH

During British India, Bangladesh and Pakistan were parts of India. At that time, the standard of English was quite high, and Bengal was more advanced in the race to learn colonial language, prompted by the competition among the Indians to speak and write the King's English (Das, 2009: 27-28). After the partition in 1947 (i.e. between India and Pakistan), the standard of English remained the same in Pakistan, where it was taught and learned as a second language, and was the language of the administration, higher education, and the 'medium of instruction between linguistically diverse' West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Das, 2009: 28). With the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, as a result of the Independence War, English lost its second language status to become a foreign language, which seriously affected the teaching and learning of the colonial language (*ibid.*).

After the Independence War of 1971, *Bangla* replaced English as the medium of instruction (see Khan, 2004). Later on two policies further led to the decline of English in the country (Ara, 2009: 9). Until 1980, English was a compulsory subject in all BA and pass courses at the tertiary level, which was then discontinued without providing any alternative for those who wanted to improve their skills in the language (Rahman, 1999: 18). In 1987 the 'Bengali Introduction Law' sent the ultimate message that 'Bengali' (i.e. *Bangla*) was to be employed for all government functions (Banu and Sussex, 2001: 126). This nationalistic measure in order to popularize *Bangla*, which is the national and official language of Bangladesh, relegated English to a mere subject rather than a language, which was learnt by memorizing the grammatical rules and regulations (of English) in order to pass exams and secure good marks/grades. Good grades would provide opportunities for securing admission in good colleges or universities. Consequently, the decline of English continued, and the proof of this is quite evident in the 1990 National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) baseline survey, which reported that 'majority of the students' were 'not attaining satisfactory levels of proficiency'. The decline continued for almost a decade, and the measures to resurrect the standard of English towards the 1990s 'was deemed as a total failure'; by that time the 'damage was done' (Abedin, 2006: 1). Among the measures taken, new English textbooks were introduced as well as a new teaching approach called Communicative Language

Teaching, commonly known as CLT for short (Ara, 2009: 10). CLT was introduced in the secondary and higher secondary levels in several steps; in 1997 it was introduced in Class 7, in 1998 Class 8, 1999 Class 9, and in 2001 it was introduced in the higher secondary level, that is class 11 (Bashir, 2003: 125). It has been more than a decade, since CLT was introduced in the secondary and higher secondary education systems of Bangladesh. However, the standard of English still falls short of what it was before independence (see Abedin, 2006).

### **ENGLISH IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: PRIOR AND POST-INDEPENDENCE**

After the partition (of India) in 1947, Pakistan was born, comprising of two dominions—East and West—with India in the middle, separating the two portions (see Chowdhury, 2003). As a result of the language movement in 1952, Bangla was established as one of the state languages of Pakistan, particularly East Pakistan, where majority spoke this language (*ibid.*).

In terms of the position of English in higher education, the *East Pakistan Education Reforms Commissions Report 1957* strongly emphasized the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the institutions of higher learning:

... in the universities, it appears that the general mass of students fail to have adequate comprehension tongue of arts and science subjects when trying to learn them through English. They also find it difficult to express their ideas adequately and well in English ... Unnecessary importance need not be given to, therefore to English. What is really necessary is ... making mother language ... the vehicle of learning.

(*East Pakistan Education Reforms Commissions Report 1957*: 107)

Hence, the deemphasizing of English in higher education began even before the birth of Bangladesh. Like the *1957 Commission Report*, the *Report of the Commission on National Education 1959*, commonly known as the *Sharif Commission*, was also in favour of the national languages as the medium of instruction. However, the members of the *Sharif Commission* strongly recognized the significance of learning English, especially for people from science background (scientists, engineers) and those from technical professions to exchanged views at the international level. The *Commission on Students' Problems and Welfare 1966*, popularly known as the *Hamdadur Rahman Report*, did not recommend the teaching of English in colleges and universities as optional or compulsory subject. Then again, since the 'Universities in East Pakistan' were 'anxious to maintain the position of English' *Hamdadur Rahman Report* (1966: 112) 'constituted a Committee to examine the question of the change-over in detail keeping in view the retention of English as a compulsory subject up to the undergraduate level.'

After the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, as a result of the Independence War, the National Education Commission, also known as the *Quadrat-e-Khuda Commission*, was formed on July 26, 1972, to iron out the 'various defects and deficiencies' of the then 'education system to indicate a way as to how wholesome nationhood can be achieved through the medium of education and ot strengthen the country

in modern knowledge and creative endeavour' (*National Education Commission Report 1974*: 1). Like the *Hamdadur Rahman Report*, this commission also did not recommend the teaching of English in colleges and universities as optional or compulsory subject (*ibid.*). The *National Committee on Education Policy 1997*, in its report proposed a four-year undergraduate degree, as opposed to the three-year degree, and one-year Master's degree at the university level (Das, 2009). It further recommended a compulsory 100 marks English language paper for all degree level students (*ibid.*), but did not mention anything about the teaching of English language as a compulsory or optional subject, or English as the medium of instruction at the university level.

At present, broadly speaking, the medium of instruction of the 31 public universities is *Bangla*, with a few subjects being taught in English. Conversely, the medium of instruction of every single of the 54 local and two international private universities is English.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF LISTENING, SPEAKING, PRONUNCIATION**

In the recent years, as Bangladesh is becoming a more service oriented society, as opposed to predominantly being dependent on its agriculture, the demand for good English language skills—reading, writing, speaking, listening, pronunciation—is growing. The Government has also realized this and has introduced the communicative language teaching (CLT) syllabus for teaching English at the secondary and higher secondary levels of public education in Bangladesh in the late 1990s, and early 2000s (see Bashir, 2003). In theory, this syllabus focuses on all the four English language skills—reading, writing, speaking and listening. However, grammar-translation method (GTM), which was previously followed to teach English, particularly the writing skill, and reading to some extent, still dominates in teaching English in the public schools and college of Bangladesh, while listening and speaking are mostly ignored. Listening is directly related to speaking and pronunciation. According to Saha (2008), in most of the English language courses in Bangladesh, listening is never taught. Due to the neglect of listening still in our classes, students also become weak in spoken English (Alam and Sinha, 2009: 20). In this day and age, spoken English skill is becoming very significant in the local job market, as well as for the increasing number of students who want to travel abroad for various reasons (Aker, 2008: 66). Despite the significance of speaking and listening in today's world, they are ignored at the secondary and higher secondary levels (see Abedin, 2006). Pronunciation, though being in the syllabus in the primary level is completely ignored at the secondary and higher secondary levels as it is not even in the syllabi. Until now, the English proficiency in the schools and colleges of Bangladesh is only evaluated by grading the writing skills (see Khan, 2008). The situation in the universities tend to be similar. Further research is needed to explore whether need-based English language skills such as listening, speaking and pronunciation neglected in the institutions of higher learning in Bangladesh.

### **PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN BANGLADESH**

Dhaka University, the first public university of Bangladesh was established in 1921, which was before the birth of the nation itself in 1971 (see Chowdhury, 2003; Karim *et al.*, 2008; Haque, 2011). Until 1992, Bangladesh had 11 public universities, which could not be accommodated the growing

number of students who wanted higher education, and consequently went abroad; among the students who went abroad each year, 75,000 used to go to India (see Karim *et al.*, 2008; Haque, 2004; Haque, 2011). It was under these circumstances the Private University Act (PUA) 1992 was implemented, giving rise to 56 private universities within the next 17 years (Haque, 2008; Karim *et al.*, 2008). Since 1992, the Private University Act (PUA) has been amended twice—in 1998 and 2010 (Haque, 2011).

The 87 public and private universities, though monitored by the UGC (University Grants Commission) of Bangladesh, are autonomous and therefore follow their own systems in terms of administration, teaching, testing and evaluation (see Haque, 2011). The government funds all public universities, except the National University of Bangladesh, while the private institutions of higher learning are self funded (*ibid.*). The National University does not provide face-to-face teaching, which is done through its 1600 plus colleges, where more than one million students study (see <http://www.nu.edu.bd/>). Bangladesh Open University is the only public university to offer distance education.

### **BANGLADESHI STUDENT COMMUNITY AT UNIVERSITY PUTRA MALAYSIA**

University Putra Malaysia has probably the largest and most vibrant Bangladeshi postgraduate student communities in entire Malaysia. The students for the most part are studying M.A., M.Sc., Ph.D. or post doctoral studies in various faculties—Faculty of Agriculture, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Faculty of Educational Studies, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Economics and Management, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology, Faculty of Environmental Studies, Faculty of Agriculture and Food Sciences. A number of Bangladeshi students, especially those in the Faculty of Agriculture, are on various types of scholarships. Majority of the students have completed their first (B.A. or B.Sc.) and second (M.A. or M.Sc.) from public universities in Bangladesh, while only a very few have graduated from private universities. Most of the students are pursuing their second M.A. or M.Sc. at UPM. A couple of them, after completing their Ph.D. have joined UPM as faculty members.

When I was pursuing my second M.A. in the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication in 2000, most of the postgraduate Bangladeshi scholarship students studied in the Faculty of Agriculture, as UPM was originally an agricultural university—Universiti Puterianian Malaysia. In 1972, Universiti Puterianian Malaysia became Universiti Putra Malaysia, to expand its area of research to other disciplines as well. UPM is one of Malaysia's five research universities, and not only has the largest number of Ph.D. holders but also produces the most number of Ph.D. graduates every year among all the private and public universities (see *UPM Graduate Study Brochure*, 2011). It is also one of the most student friendly universities in Malaysia. Though I completed my first Ph.D. from the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya in 2005, the student friendly atmosphere of UPM was one of the factors that prompted me to return to this university in 2011 to pursue my second Ph.D., this time from the Faculty of Educational Studies.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was done at one of the research universities of Malaysia, namely, Universiti Putra Malaysia, where majority of the Bangladeshi postgraduate students have exposure to the job market, higher education and are familiar with conferences and seminars, where the marginalized English language skills such as listening, speaking and pronunciation are imperative communication competencies.

The Bangladeshi students at UPM represent different public and private universities of Bangladesh. A majority of students have work experience. In other words, they are familiar with the demand and the need of the marginalized English language skills (MELS) that I have earlier mentioned. Out of a total number of approx100 Bangladeshi graduate and postgraduate student community at UPM, quota sampling (see Ary, 2010) was used to select 10 to represent the different public and private institutions of higher learning. Among the 87 (31 public and 56 private) universities in Bangladesh (see Haque 2004, 2011), the selected respondents studied in 11 public and private universities. All of the respondent, have done their first (B.A., B.Sc.) and second (M.A., M.Sc.) degrees from Bangladeshi institutions of higher learning, and have job experience; that is, they have worked in public and private sectors as well as the academia.

Even though the time frame for the data collection lasted for less than a semester, the contact time with the interviewees was intense. Sometimes the subjects were met two to three times, during the course of a day. The reason for this is either that the Bangladeshi student community live on campus or only 2-10 minutes walking distance from campus. Since I am a fulltime Ph.D. student, and stay very close to the campus (nine minutes walking distance), I spend around 10-12 hours and sometimes up to 14 hours on campus, and quite frequently run into my subjects. As a result, we sometimes not only have breakfast, lunch and dinner together, but also have snacks and tea at various times during the course of a day.

The interviews were always informal, mostly over casual conversations. Some interviews were also conducted during various social gatherings like birthdays, anniversaries, graduation celebrations, and religious festivals like Eid-ul Adha, Dipavali or Durga Puja, as well as a few excursions to Putrajaya, Ciberjaya, Port Dickson. Even though I am from the same country as my respondents, it was of paramount importance to socialize and mingle with them before any attempt was made to ask questions pertaining to the research. Socializing with the interviewees was a very significant strategy to develop rapport and gain their trust. The interviews were not recorded, as the respondents were apprehensive about disclosing information regarding their knowledge/level of English and their IELTS scores. Hence, a recorder was not used to conduct the interviews, as this might be considered as invasive and/or intrusive, as well as breach of social decorum. Chitchats and small talk were essential in order to elicit the relevant information. Since I could not record, I had to jot down the details very quickly so as not to slow down the pace to the natural flow of conversation.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Before jumping to any conclusion regarding the outcome of the study, it is worth mentioning that the findings should be viewed from a holistic or overall perspective rather than judging the summary of the respondents' demographics and responses in Table 1 separately. The demographics, the opinions of the respondents, the answers to the central research objectives and the discussions should all be considered simultaneously in order to assess the outcome of this qualitative investigation.

### DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

The medium of instruction of the public and private schools and colleges, where the respondents (R1–R8) studied was the national and official language of Bangladesh, that is, *Bangla*. All but two of the respondents (R9 and R10) studied in public universities, where *Bangla* was, and still is, the medium of instruction (Table 1). The medium of instruction of the private universities where R9 and R10 studied is English. All (R1–R10) the respondents have completed their first (B.Sc., B.A.) and second (M.Sc., M.A.) degrees from Bangladesh Universities. Most of the respondents (R1–R9) are from science background, except one (R9) who is from humanities background. Among them, eight of them are pursuing M.Sc. and two Ph.D. at UPM. They all have experience of working in the Bangladeshi public and private job sectors. Two of the respondents (R1, R2) are government officers, while one (R9) is a lecturer of a private university; they are on study leave. The rest (R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10) have previously worked in the following organizations—private university, advertising firm, private bank, private phone company, pharmaceutical company, fisheries project, private English medium school, a news magazine. In other words, all the respondents have experience of working in the real world, where some have worked in more than one organization. At UPM their IELTS score range from 5.5 to 6.0 before or after completing 'English language skill' (ELS) and/or 'Tertiary English' (TE) course(s). It should be mentioned that in order to fulfil their English language requirement criterion at UPM, they were required to attend ELS and/or TE course(s) for one semester, prior to the commencement of their postgraduate degrees.

**Table 1: Summary of the respondents' demographics and responses**

R	Deg	Pu/Pr (S/C/U)	Taught Eng Lang Skills	MOI	Degree at UPM	ELS/TE/ IELTS	Job Experience	Neglected Eng Lang Skills	Problems faced due to lack of need-based English lang. skills	Suggestions for academia to teach the neglected Eng Lang Skills	How did they cope/improve
R1	S.S.C.	Public	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	IELTS: 5.5 TE	Govt. officer	Listening, pronunciation, speaking,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Struggled in job interviews</li> <li>Faced lots of difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Train teachers to teach these skills</li> <li>These skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coaching centre</li> <li>I still need to improve further, esp.</li> </ul>
	H.S.C.	Public	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public		Bangla							

	M.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla					while speaking during seminar presentation at UPM	should be made compulsory for every student in the universities	listening
<b>R2</b>	S.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	IELTS: 5.5 TE	Govt. officer	Listening, speaking, pronunciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Couldn't express myself in job interviews</li> <li>• Couldn't understand pronunciation of job interviewers</li> </ul>	The teachers in the schools, colleges and universities should teach and make the students practice these skills	Watched a lot of English movies
	H.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							
	M.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							
<b>R3</b>	S.S.C.	Public	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	IELTS: 5.5 TE	Lecturer of a private university	Listening, speaking, pronunciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes my students don't understand my English pronunciation</li> </ul>	These skills should be compulsory in schools, colleges & universities, and students should be made to practice them in academia	I practiced with my friends from the English Department Watched video clips from YouTube and the internet
	H.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							
	M.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							
<b>R4</b>	S.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	ELS IELTS: 6.0	Ad firm	Listening, pronunciation, speaking, presentation	Several job interviews I faced were conducted in English—I couldn't understand the interview questions	English should be made a second language, so that our overall standard can improve; just look at India and Singapore	Watched a lot of English channels—national geographic, discovery, travel and living Kept private English tutor
	H.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							
	M.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							
<b>R5</b>	S.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	IELTS: 5.5 TE	Private bank	Pronunciation, listening, speaking,	The first time I sat for IELTS, I did terrible in my listening and speaking sections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These skills should be made mandatory for all students from every department in all the universities</li> </ul>	After graduation I went to coaching centre to learn speaking so that I do well in the job interviews
	H.S.C.	Public	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							
	M.Sc.	Public	—————	Bangla							

R6	S.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	IELTS: 5.5 TE	Phone company	Listening, speaking, pronunciation, presentation	Struggled in understanding the lectures at UPM  Never spoke during group presentation at UPM	These practical skills should not only be taught but also evaluated in the schools, colleges and universities	By practicing with my friends via Skype  I still need to improve a lot before the final thesis defence
	H.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public	————	Bangla							
	M.Sc.	Public	————	Bangla							
R7	S.S.C.	Public	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	IELTS: 5.5 TE	A pharmaceutical company	Listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading	Struggled with listening & speaking sections & had to sit for IELTS twice, before I scored a 6.0  Faced listening and speaking problem in job interview	The medium of instruction of all public universities should be English  'Practice makes perfect', so practicing these skills is important	I took private lessons from my sister's friend, who is English lecturer in a university
	H.S.C.	Public	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public	————	Bangla							
	M.Sc.	Public	————	Bangla							
R8	S.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla	M.Sc.	IELTS: 5.5 TE	Fisheries project	Listening, speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary	Initially faced problems in understanding the lectures at UPM  My interview board had difficulty in understanding my pronunciation	We need more skilled teachers to teach these skills—most of the teachers have problems in speaking a pronouncing in English	By going to a coaching centre and practicing the practical skills  But I still need more practice
	H.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.Sc.	Public	————	Bangla							
	M.Sc.	Public	————	Bangla							
R9	S.S.C.	M.Sc.	Reading, writing	Bangla	Ph.D.	ELS IELTS: 6.0	Private English medium school  Lecturer of a Private university	Speaking, pronunciation, Listening	Faced problems in teaching in English in the English medium school—in the university, I teach in <i>Bangla</i>	English is a foreign language in Bangladesh; the Govt. Should make it into second language  These practical skills should be taught from school up to	By watching and listening to CNN and BBC  Watched news clips from the internet
	H.S.C.	M.Sc.	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.A.	Private	Reading, writing	English							
	M.A.	Private	————	English							

										university	
R10	S.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla	Ph.D.	ELS IELTS: 6.0	Private airlines Lecturer of a private university Reporter of a magazine	Listening, pronunciation, speaking	Despite doing ELS at UPM I did not do well in listening & speaking sections in IELTS; I only scored 6.0  At times struggled in job interviews	In private universities listening course should be offered separately, and the students should be made to practice speaking, listening and pronunciation skills frequently	By practicing them quite frequently with my father
	H.S.C.	Private	Reading, writing	Bangla							
	B.A.	Private	Reading, writing, Speaking	English							
	M.A.	Private		English							

**OPINIONS OF THE RESPONDENTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings suggest that all the respondent (R1–R10) studied in private and public *Bangla* medium schools and colleges, where two patriarchy English language skills (writing and reading) were emphasized (See Table 1). The medium of instruction of all the public universities where the respondents (R1–R8) studied is *Bangla*, where no English language skills are taught, not even reading and writing. Two respondents (R9 and R10) studied in private universities, where the medium is English. In the case of R9 English reading and writing skills were taught, while for R10, reading, writing and speaking were taught in their respective undergraduate programmes; such skills or other English language skills were not taught in their graduate programmes. Therefore, at the tertiary level, it seems that English reading and writing skills are also marginalized, especially in public universities. However, it seems that listening, speaking and pronunciation are marginalized in public and private universities. The findings from this research suggest that Spoken English is taught in one of the two private universities. However, it may be a matter of significance as R10 mentioned that they were not given many opportunities to practice spoken English in class, as the teacher talked most of the time.

In order to fulfil the English language requirement of UPM, all the respondents (R1–R10) were required to submit IELTS score. Only three (R4, R9, R10) were able to get a score of Band 6.0. It is important to mention that they got this score after doing ELS (English Language Skills) at UPM for one semester. Band 6.0 in IELTS is the minimum score in order to become a fulltime graduate student in this university. The rest of the seven respondents got provisional admission, as they only scored 5.5 in IELTS, and had to complete TE (Tertiary English) for one semester, before becoming fulltime students.

Apart from identifying listening, speaking and pronunciation as the neglected English language skills by every respondent (R1–R10) in this qualitative study, R4 and R6 identified presentation, R7 reading, R8 vocabulary skills as well. It needs to be mentioned that presentation is not explicitly related

to English language skills. It is a technique, and art of public speaking that can be associated with any language, and not necessarily English. Granted, that is a necessary skill required in the real world context, particularly in the employment sector, but there is no direct relationship between presentation skill and English language skills. Reading could also be one of the neglected English language skills, because as Khan (2008) mentions that in schools and colleges of Bangladesh English proficiency is measured only via writing skills. However, in the context of this study, it seems that listening, speaking and pronunciation appear to be more marginalized than the other skills in the higher education. In fact, it may be possible to a certain extent to learn reading and vocabulary skills individually at the tertiary level, because by the time students enter the university in Bangladesh, they would have already gone through at least 12 years of compulsory English. However, English listening, speaking and pronunciation skill are extremely difficult to acquire and/or learn without the help of an expert, or at least someone who has the basic knowledge of teaching such skills. In terms of speaking, which includes pronunciation, Jahan (2008) regrets that student are still unable to speak competently even after learning English for 13-15 years, because in this age of globalization, in many situations it (spoken English) seems to be used as a yard stick to measure a person's English language competency. Among the four English language skills, Crystal (2009) identifies listening as the 'Cinderella skill'. In the Bangladeshi context, this appears to be the case as well (see Kaisar and Khannam, 2008; Abedin *et al*, 2009). However, based on the findings and the supporting literature, it seems that listening, speaking and pronunciation are more marginalized than the other English language skills, particularly in the public and private universities of Bangladesh.

All the respondents (R1–R10) of this study have exposure to the real world, as they not only have job experience (some more than one), but they also have experience of studying in public and private Bangladeshi universities as well as foreign university (i.e. UPM), and some have experience of international seminars and conferences as well. The job experiences range from government sector (R1, R2), to private sector (R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R10), as well as the private academic (R3, R9, R10) sector.

Due to the lack of need-based English language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, pronunciation) all the respondents (R1–R10) faced a number of problems in the real world context. Majority (R1, R2, R4, R7, R8, R10) of them faced problems in job interviews, which were conducted in English. They had problems in either expressing themselves in English, or they could not understand the job interviewers' accent and/or pronunciation. In other words, they (i.e. R1, R2, R4, R7, R8, R10) struggled with the speaking and listening skills, as well as the sub-skill which is common to both, that is, pronunciation. R3 also faced problems while teaching her students, as they could not understand her pronunciation. Akter (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008), Maniruzzman (2008), and Khan (2007) stress the significance of appropriate pronunciation, and being able to speak good English in an EFL (English as a foreign language) context like Bangladesh. R5, R7, R10 experienced difficulties either with English speaking or listening skill, or with both during IELTS test. Consequently, they did not do as well as they had anticipated. Both R6 and R8 initially could not understand class lecturers at UPM; they had listening problems. Kaisar and Khannam (2008) and Abedin *et al* (2009) emphasize the importance of practicing English listening. R6 also had problems in expressing herself in English; hence, she did not speak during group presentations

in class. R1 struggled during seminar presentation at UPM. Incompetence in spoken English compelled R9 to teach her private university students in *Bangla*, even though the medium of instruction of her university is English. In her previous job as a teacher of an English medium school, she struggled in taking classes due to her lack of command over the English language.

Among the recommendations made by the seven of the respondents (R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R7, R8) to teach the marginalized English language skills, were to make the skills mandatory in the education system of Bangladesh, make the students practice the skills, and train the teachers so they can teach those skills appropriately. R4 and R9 suggested that English should be given the status of being a second language, as opposed to being a foreign language in Bangladesh. In fact, R4 pointed out that due to the second language status, the standard of English in India and Singapore was much higher than Bangladesh. Since English listening skill is usually incorporated in the speaking courses in some private universities, R10 said that the listening skill should be offered and taught as a separate course at the university level, and that students need to practice it frequently. Since writing is the only skill for evaluating English proficiency level in Bangladeshi schools and colleges (see Khan 2007), R6 mentioned that listening, speaking and pronunciation should not only be taught in the schools, colleges and universities, but they should be evaluated as well. R7 is well aware that since the medium of instruction of public universities is *Bangla*, the students are not taught any of English language skills. Therefore, he wants the medium of instruction of public institutions of higher learning to change from *Bangla* to English, like the private universities.

Due to the inability to teach the pragmatic English language skills like listening, speaking and pronunciation by the education system in Bangladesh, R1, R5 and R8 resorted to coaching centres to overcome their deficiencies in such English language skills. R2 emphasized the significance watching a lot of English movies to improve listening, speaking and pronunciation skills. R3, R6 and R9 resorted to social media (YouTube, Skype) and news video clips (podcasts, vodcasts/vidcasts) from the internet to develop the neglected English language skills. Elia (2006) and Coburn (2010) demonstrate how Skype could be a significant tool in enhancing English-speaking competency. R3 practiced the marginalized English language skills on a face-to-face platform with his friend, R7 with his sister's friend from the English Department, while R10 practiced with her father. R4 to improve his English, not only kept a private tutor, but also watched a lot of English channels like National Geographic, Discovery, Travel and Living, to name a few. From the above, it seems that apart from practicing in face-to-face situations, whether with friends, teachers, family members, the media—traditional media, new media, social media—can also facilitate in the learning of the marginalized English language skills.

## **FINDINGS IN TERMS OF THE CENTRAL RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, it seems that the English language skills that are generally marginalized in the public and private educational institutions of Bangladesh are listening, speaking and pronunciation. Though some of these skills are in the syllabus of some private universities, they are not taught in a thorough manner for the students to learn them well; that is, enough practice is

not done. Consequently, students even after graduating from universities are generally poor in need-based English language skills.

Since all the respondents have work experience, some more than others, and all of them are studying as international students at UPM, they have exposure to the use of English in the real world. In the real world context, in job interviews, teaching in schools and universities, attending courses at UPM, presenting in international seminars and conferences, the respondents faced difficulties in terms of the need-based English language skills such as listening, speaking and pronunciation. Even though a few faced problems in presentation, it should be mentioned that presentation skill is not a criterion of English language skills.

With regard to how the marginalized English language skills or MELS could be emphasized, the respondents suggested making them (i.e. MELS) compulsory subjects/courses at the university level, and to make the students practice such skills. But before that, the teachers themselves should receive appropriate training so that they can teach the students appropriately. Due to the lack of emphasis of MELS in education system of Bangladesh, particularly in the institutions of higher learning, the respondents employed various ways to develop their listening, speaking and pronunciation skills: by watching English movies, talking with friends, watching clips from YouTube, talking with private English tutor, enrolling in coaching centre, practicing with friends via Skype, listening to CNN and BBC. One thing that is common to all of the participants is that in order to improve their command of MELS, they all practiced the neglected English language skills in various platforms in their different capacities.

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the intentions of embarking on a qualitative research of this nature to explore MELS (listening, speaking and pronunciation) in the Bangladeshi institutions of higher learning by interviewing the postgraduate student community from Universiti Putra Malaysia, was to get in-depth knowledge from respondents who had the practical exposure of experiencing firsthand use of the pragmatic need-based English language skills English in the real world; that is, the job sector as well as higher education in a foreign university beyond the shores of the native country, where the medium of instruction is English. The findings provide a rare insight that a quantitative investigation might have taken for granted or overlooked, that is the detailed explanation as to why English language skills such as listening, speaking and pronunciation, in spite of being neglected and/or not specifically evaluated in the education system, seems equally or more significant than reading and writing skills in the real world.

Due to necessity or instrumental motivation, the respondents of this study overcame their deficiencies in the marginalized English skills by resorting to various strategies, methods and approaches. The qualitative nature of this study allows us to delve into the rich findings, which can pave the way for more elaborate studies to investigate various techniques to overcome the present drawbacks of the education system of Bangladesh in terms of teaching the need-based English language skill, particularly in higher education. Moreover, the interesting techniques employed by the respondents to improve their level of pragmatic English language skills may be further explored to see whether such

methods and approaches can be adopted and/or adapted by the public and private universities of an EFL country like Bangladesh.

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