

## English Language Teaching Tertiary Level Problems

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UNTIL quite recently, no serious thought was given to the teaching of English as a compulsory subject. The focus on Bengali as a means of forging national unity and identity for a new country like Bangladesh was understandable, and had been effective for the emerging nation. But ultimately, the advantage of having a common mother tongue had also proved to be a disadvantage in terms of communication with the world at large. Bangladesh, unlike countries with similar background, had not needed to adopt English as a LINGUA FRANCA, and as a consequence the standard of English had dropped.

The decline in English standards started during the late sixties when HSC exams in Bengali were introduced. English was dropped at Honours level shortly after Liberation. It was also dropped at pass level in the late 1970s when only 10-12% of students were succeeding in getting degrees because of problems with English.

By around 1978, there were already concern expressed in some quarters about the ever declining standard of English — and a 'Task force' was formed to investigate the problems of English language and English teaching. But the nationalistic feelings towards Bengali was still very strong and the matter ended inconclusively.

However in 1992 the Bangladesh government decreed that English should be re-introduced at tertiary level. The main reason is to enhance the employment potential of graduates — particularly at higher degree level. Since the Act was passed some universities have taken steps to introduce general English courses, but the majority have not yet been able to do much.

There are too many problems. Despite these the government recently decreed that general English MUST be compulsory for all Pass and Honours students from 1995-96, and that there should be two-year English

language courses carrying a total of 100 marks. Individual institutions can apply for an extension of the implementation date if they cannot meet the government requirement immediately. It seems that almost all institutions in the country will need to do this.

Measures taken so far to improve the standards of English have been mostly quantitative rather than qualitative. For example: the 1990 extension of English at Primary level to years 1 and 11 brought the total number of years of English study to twelve. The more recent decision to make English compulsory at tertiary level brings the total to fourteen years of English in all. Moreover, the government has asked the universities to double the number of places for degrees in English. To comply with the Government plans, the National University has introduced Honours and Masters degrees in English in fourty-four degree colleges this year. This, despite the existing lack of teachers of English.

All such measures clearly show that there is a Will to improve standards of English, but the Way is not so clear.

Many feel that the responsibility for English Language Teaching (ELT) should lie at the primary or secondary level, and in an ideal world this would be the case. However, ELT, at the lower levels of education has suffered from the same neglect as at tertiary levels. The system as it stands cannot produce school leavers who are proficient in English. Measures are now being taken to improve the standard of English in secondary schools, and a major new UK ODA-supported programme will be focusing on the training of teachers, appropriate methodologies and materials etc.

However, it will take an absolute minimum of five years before any effect of this programme is felt at the

tertiary level. And more realistically it will be at least ten years before there is any significant improvement in the English standards of incoming students. There is an urgent need for action before then. The re-introduction of compulsory English at the tertiary level can be seen as a remedial measure, and it may be that it can be dropped once the secondary schools are able to provide adequate training in English. In the meantime, tertiary institutes have to act. The problems are enormous, the resources are scarce, and there is no consensus of opinion on how to proceed.

### Constraints:

After more than a quarter of a century of lack of real attention to English, there are now serious problems to be addressed by all sectors of education. The single biggest problem is the lack of suitable trained and experienced teachers. The need for teachers is most pressingly felt in the teaching of English at all levels of education. Most universities are running short of English teachers. And the overall situation is much worse in degree colleges — both government or non-government. About 80% of degree colleges offering Honours courses have only four teachers in the English Department; there should at least be seven. About 130 degree colleges have only one teacher of English, and about 30 colleges have none. Because, of the move away from English in the last few decades, many of those teachers on the job do not have what would be regarded as an adequate level of proficiency in English. The figures above relate mainly to the teaching of English Literature. The number of trained English language teachers available is negligible.

### The Size Of The Problem

Throughout the country there are

about 300,000 new tertiary-level students each year. All of these students are now to be taught English. As with all subjects that require students to have a large amount of practical training, small groups are required, assuming an optimum size of 25. According to a most conservative estimate over seven thousand Language teachers are required to teach the language to all these students. Under the present circumstances, this is obviously out of the question. If we double the number of student in each group, violating the ELT rules, the language teaching is bound to suffer.

### Potential Sources Of Language Teachers

Taking into account the existing shortage of ELT professionals, the Government has made a commitment to provide grants for teachers as per rule. It will sanction the creation of new posts according to the existing regulations. The regulation says that teachers must have at Least 2nd class Honours and 2nd class Masters — or (if no Honours) 1st class Masters. Unfortunately, because of the ever-declining standards of English, the tertiary system is not able to supply enough potential teachers who conform to the regulations. It is a 'Catch 22' situation.

But there are some exceptions in the case of English teachers. If a teachers has lower qualifications than the official standards (e.g., 3rd class degree) then the rule can be relaxed and these teachers are given up to 3 years to 'make the grade.' In order to provide teachers for all the new compulsory courses in English, the rules will have to be relaxed on a regular basis, with the inevitable effect that standards of English teaching will decline even further. And even after that there will be great problems in finding the number of teachers needed.

(To be continued)