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“Teaching of English needs gearing”

Prof M. H. Rashid

Our JU correspondent, Farid Ahmed talks to the Chairman of JU's English Department Prof Md Harun-Rashid. Excerpts of the interview are given below.

F.A: What about the standard of English at the SSC, HSC and degree level?

Prof M H Rashid: The standard of English at the SSC and HSC levels has gone down considerably. At the Honours level no English is taught in

place in a society according to its demand. You see there is a great deal of deception going on here. People who speak against English take a great deal of trouble in ensuring that their own children speak and write it properly. I myself pleaded for abolition of English at the degree pass level once but I think I was wrong. I think we should have an effective English language teaching at the graduation level and that as an effective second language.

As a result students end up having a poor linguistic background in both English and Bengali. For the lack of a consistent policy the language situation is left to the teachers' choice. In such a chaotic situation the use of Bengali to teach English literature is not unheard of.

As to standards, can we really speak of one standard, higher or lower? The gap between the rural and urban schools has widened so much that we can no longer speak

FA Will revival of English

to a satisfactory level. First we have to produce adequate number of qualified teachers.

Secondly, we must provide for teacher training which has been the weakest point in our education.

Thirdly, books and teaching aids must be written and provided at a cheaper cost.

Fourthly, the society should be motivated to accept a strong second language. Education Department should know how to plan, organise and administer the whole thing.

I should not make the inventory any longer than this, because both the Government and the Society have left language learning to the private tutorial homes. Aren't there high educational administrators who send their boys and girls to private tutors even though that is not legally tenable? Besides, for the last 30 years or so we have thought more about buildings in our educational planning than improving the quality and condition of the man or woman who teaches.

F.A. Should Universities concentrate on teaching literature only? Prof M.H. Rashid,

I don't think universities should teach literature only. They must diversify and branch out into linguistics and second language teaching and thus produce enough teachers for the Country. They should open courses on language and language teaching and take sufficient number of students. Isn't it a shame that we are teachers in the Department and we have taken only 15 students this year in the first year class?

Prof Md Harunur Rashid, the Chairman of JU's English Dept further added that English as an effective second language will not thrive in Bangladesh until Bengali is made effective as a native tongue. There is hardly any language teaching in Bengali. They teach literature right from the beginning and language is left to the learner and not to teacher.

The books are not carefully graded and modern language teaching methods are yet to make inroads into their studies. The language teaching situation in Bangladesh is appalling. Compared to that the English books prescribed in the school syllabi are language oriented and carefully graded. Whenever a serious effort will be made to make English effective as a second language, teachers of Bengali will raise the same hue and cry as before on grounds of nationalism and linguistic chauvinism, which are, in fact, excuses for their own inefficiency and failure to make Bengali an effective native tongue in schools and universities even seventy years after independence. And believe you me, most of them teach or arrange teaching of English to their own children.



Departments other than English and at the degree pass level it is an elective or optional paper now. So most students at the degree level do not learn any English except on their own. So their standard I believe would not be anything more than what they had attained at the Intermediate level.

Speaking of standards, it reminds me of a survey conducted by the British Council a few years ago. If the results of that survey is anything near the truth the standard of English of our students belonging to the Intermediate class was placed at the Eighth grade. That was a few years ago and I don't think the situation has improved since then.

The standard of English at the degree pass or the honours level is appalling. This is because our universities do not know what their medium of instruction is at the higher level.

Look up Bangladesh universities in the Commonwealth Universities Year Book and you will have an idea about the ambivalent situation that prevails there.

None of the Universities show Bengali as the only medium of instruction. In some, it is bilingual, and in others the medium is English (BUET for example). The truth is English is an officially proclaimed second language, but you cannot have a strong second language policy unless you know what you have done with your mother tongue.

of a standard. The rural schools have fewer trained and qualified teachers, the students have a limited exposure to the language either at home or at school and as such whatever English they learn is bound to be an apology for language learning.

The urban schools, in contrast, are more fortunate, but there too English has taken refuge in private tutorial homes rather than the class room which is its proper place. So we cannot really speak of one standard, there is in fact a multiplicity of standards: the higher the standard the fewer the number of learners and the few best sorts could be located at individual families who eventually send their boys and girls abroad.

F.A: Is it justified not to have English at the graduation pass level?

Prof M H Rashid: You see language is a weapon and it depends on what you want to do with that weapon. We have abolished English as a compulsory subject at the degree pass level and there is no English language at the Honours level. But where ever you go for a job, they would like to see how proficient you are in English. You cannot blame the employers, because they deal with the International business world and if you don't know the international language, they are not going to pay you for nothing. A language justifies its own

medium alter the situation.

Prof M H Rashid Revival of English medium is not going to alter the situation much. After all what percentage of students would benefit from that? Besides, there is not much language learning there in those schools. Rote learning is encouraged which deadens their power of thinking.

Since initiation into a foreign tongue is made early, students miss the feel of their own native tongue and since they learn the foreign tongue without its native situation they miss its feel too. Such students are bound to have difficulties when it comes to creative or serious critical writing.

This is being reintroduced to accommodate the Toyota elites of the society, any one with a pair of eyes can see that. I don't think English medium Schools are an answer to the language situation in the Country. I don't think it is any problem- If I had the choice I would stop reintroduction of English mediums and concentrate on teaching of English as a second language and make it more effective.

F.A: How can English teaching be made more effective at the primary and secondary stage?

Prof M. H Rashid, That's a huge task, an enormous task for which we neither have resource personnel nor funds enough to bring it up