

ESL/EFL LEARNERS' POOR PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH: THE FACTORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the factors that are responsible for the ESL/EFL learners' poor performance in English. The study was conducted in Bangladesh in nine selected secondary institutions from three different districts (i.e. Dhaka, Khulna, and Satkhira) covering urban, suburban, and rural areas. Data were collected through closed type questionnaire survey from students, and unstructured interview of the teachers. To collect and analyze the data, both qualitative and quantitative approaches of research were used. It was found from the study that so many factors lied for the ESL/EFL learners 'poor performance in English like learners' psychological factors, teachers' factors, factors related to teaching procedures, teaching and learning environment, syllabus and curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

In ESL/EFL countries like Bangladesh, students' skills and performance in English are not satisfactory. Every year, a huge number of students get very poor marks in English examinations. Even the students, who somehow manage to get good marks in English, cannot use the language successfully in their practical life. But, to keep pace with the globalized world, English skills are essential. To support the idea of necessity of learning English, Dr. Mohammad Farashuddin (2011), former Governor of Bangladesh Bank, and founder Vice-Chancellor of East West University in Bangladesh stated, "proficiency in English is a must for the nation to abolish poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and indignity" (cited in Azam, 2012).

The present institutional education system in Bangladesh can be categorized broadly into three stages as: (i) Primary stage (ii) Secondary stage (iii) Tertiary stage. The secondary stage can also be categorized as: (i) Junior secondary level (class 6-8) (ii) Secondary level (class 9-10) (iii) Higher secondary level (class 11-12). In this study, the researcher worked on secondary level that is class 9-10 in Bangladesh. This is a very important stage for higher education since all the basic knowledge and skills develop from here.

This study aimed to find out the possible factors that are responsible for the ESL/EFL learners' poor performance in English. The research had been undertaken to find answers to the following questions:

- Is secondary students' performance in English satisfactory in Bangladesh?
- If not yes, what are the factors responsible for the students' poor performance?
- Are the teaching procedures, teaching and learning environment, syllabus, and curriculum effective to learn English successfully?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

ESL/EFL

ESL stands for English as Second Language and EFL stands for English as Foreign Language. Second or foreign language learning is not a subconscious and natural process rather it a conscious process. Krashen (1985) while propounding his theory of second language learning, differentiates 'learning' from 'acquisition' saying, learning is the conscious approach towards a language whereas 'acquisition' takes place unconsciously in a natural order for enabling people to use the language.

Learners' Psychological Factors

Krashen (2002) hypothesizes the 'affective filter' that consists of various psychological factors, such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence which can strongly enhance or inhibit second language acquisition. In this regard, Schumann (1978) in Basu & Bhowmik (2005) states motivation as an affective factor like 'culture-shock'. Learners with high motivation progress rapidly and gradually become successful language learners while learners with low motivation or little interest learn very slowly.

Anxiety is another affective factor that affects language learning. "Anxiety (its presence or absence) is best seen not as a necessary condition of successful L2 learning, but rather as a factor that contributes in differing degrees in different learners" (Ellis, 1994, p. 483). Krashen (1982) believes that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, self-efficacy, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are well equipped for success in second language acquisition.

The learner's factors are usually considered to be the uneven aspects in successful language learning (Maniruzzaman, 1997-98) that varies from learner to learner. So, the performance of the students varies from one another having the same exposure in the same classroom. He again opines, "... an individual learner's socio-psychological factors and learning style have significant impact upon his/her achievement/proficiency in a SL/FL" (P. 98).

Other Affective Factors in Second/Foreign Language Learning

Along with the psychological factors, some other factors have an influence on the students' poor performance in English. Analysis of data by Osunde & Ogiegbaen (2005) revealed that lack of trained English language teachers, poor instructional delivery, lack of infrastructural facilities, teachers' attitude towards innovation, the traditional content/knowledge oriented curriculum and general students' apathy in English language were factors associated with students' poor performance.

It is generally agreed that the English performance of the learners in Bangladesh is not satisfactory in comparison to the time they spend learning the very language. With reference to (Widdowson, 1978), Larsen-Freeman (2000) illustrates that the goal of the most of the methods for the students is to learn to communicate in the target language. But it is observed that students can produce sentences accurately in a lesson, but cannot use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside the classroom. In this regard, Hoque (1999: 93) notes, "Despite the considerable amount of time devoted to English instruction, the general proficiency and achievement of the majority of the students graduating from high schools is unsatisfactory and disproportionately low" (cited in Khan & Akter, 2011).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the study area is the secondary level in Bangladesh, the researcher selected nine secondary schools for data collection covering urban, suburban and rural areas from different three districts (i.e. Dhaka, Khulna, Satkhira) in Bangladesh to get the true picture of the whole country. As the mainstream secondary level follows the same syllabus, curriculum, textbook and teaching methods, nine institutions from three districts had been surveyed to get the representation of the whole country. And Bangladesh is the representation of the whole ESL/EFL countries. The institutions, where survey was conducted, were randomly selected.

For the survey, two types of respondents were selected: students, and teachers. Total 270 students responded to the questionnaire from the above mentioned institutions. From the each school, 30 students were selected. From each area, total 90 students were selected (urban-90, suburban-90, and rural-90). All the students were from class ten since they had good enough experience about the syllabus and curriculum of the secondary level. Total 20 teachers were interviewed from the above mentioned

institutions. Among them, 07 teachers were from urban areas, 06 teachers from suburban areas, and another 07 teachers from rural areas.

The major equipments that had been used in this research were closed type questionnaire survey, and unstructured interview. The data were collected through questionnaire survey from students, and unstructured interview of the teachers from the selected institutes.

To analyze the data, both qualitative and quantitative approaches of research had been applied. The qualitative data were analyzed using paper and pencil to understand the opinions and views of the respondents. On the other hand, quantitative data were analyzed manually and have been shown as percentage. Since in some items (item no. 3, 5, and 8) one respondent could choose more than one options, the responses would be more than the respondent numbers, and total add up to more than 100 percent.

FINDINGS

Analyzing the data, it was found that students' English performance in Bangladesh is not satisfactory, and it was noted that so many factors were responsible for their poor performance. The overview of the study is presented below:

Students' Poor performance in English

Analyzing the students' questionnaire (item no. 06), it was found that 72% students got below 60% marks whereas 28% students got above 60% marks in the last English examination. Since 15% students failed in English and 57% students got poor marks in English, it is alarming for English education in our country, Bangladesh. The scenario is presented below with a chart:

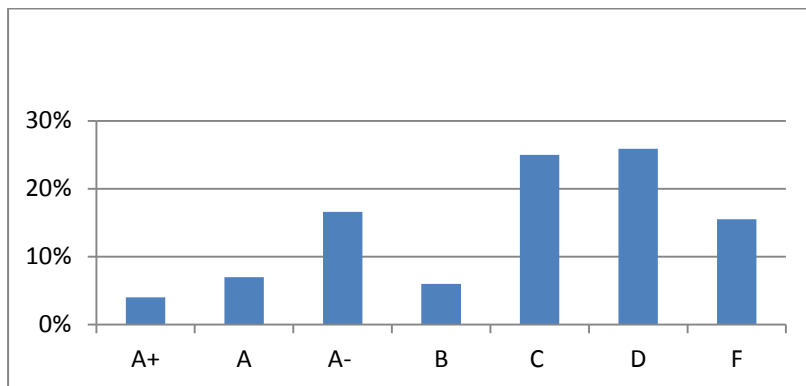


Figure 01: Scenario of Students' English Result

Note: F Grade = below 33Marks, D Grade = 33-39 Marks, C Grade = 40-49 Marks, B Grade = 50-59 Marks, A- Grade = 60-69 Marks, A Grade = 70-79 Marks, A+ Grade = Above 80 Marks, out of 100 Marks.

To find out the answer to the question (item no. 07) whether the students could use English language in their practical life, 73% students responded that they could use English language 'sometimes' in their practical life successfully. Again 23.3% students responded that they could use English language 'never' in practical life. On the other hand, only 3.7% students responded that they could use English language 'very often' practically. Analyzing the teachers' interview, it was also found that most of the teachers were dissatisfied with their students' performance in English.

Students' attitude towards English

It was found that the students were not positively and properly motivated to learning English. They have English phobia since (in response to item no. 02) 85.6% students answered that they were seriously afraid of learning English. Among them, 30% students were 'Always' afraid and 55.6% students were 'very often' afraid of learning English. On the other hand, only 14.4% students answered that they were 'sometimes' afraid of learning English. It is shown in a diagram below:

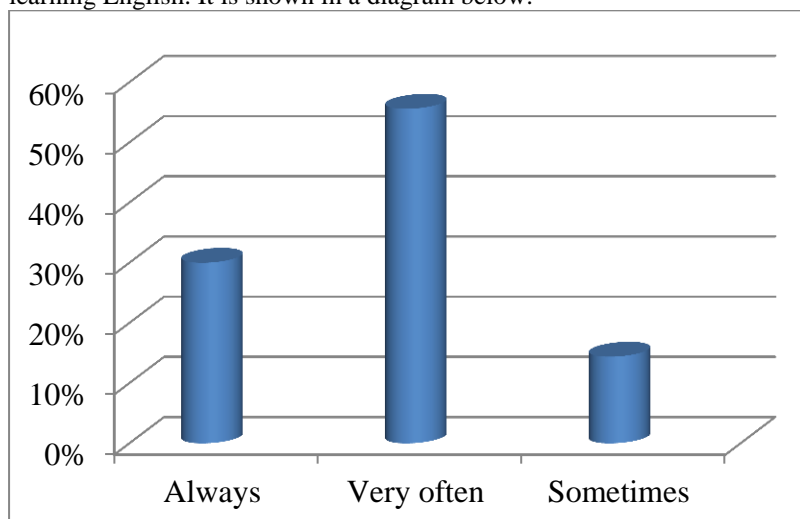


Figure 02: Students' ratio of English phobia

This fear/anxiety raises their affective filter, and they cannot learn English successfully. It is also noticeable that rural students were more afraid of learning English than the urban and suburban students. To find out their English phobia, it was also found (responses of item no. 03) that 49.7% students were afraid of learning English 'because of difficulty of teaching procedure' and 38% students mentioned the reason of being afraid as 'because of lack of proper guidance'. Another 25.9% students answered that they had 'lack of confidence' in learning English, and 12.1% students mentioned that they had 'no specific reason' of being afraid in case of learning English.

In response to the question (item no. 01), to what extent English is hard to the students, 60.7% students opined that English is 'hard' to them whereas 18.5% students opined that English is 'very hard' to them. And again 20.7% students viewed that English is 'not that much hard'. So it is clear that English seems to be hard to the majority of the students.

Students' inattentiveness in the English classes

Students, most of the cases, do not remain attentive in their English classes. To find out the answer to the question (item no. 04 & 05), whether the students were attentive enough in their English classes, it was found that 65.6% students 'sometimes' remained attentive in the English classes and 5.9% students were 'not at all' attentive in the English classes whereas only 28.5% students were really/always attentive in the English classes that indicates a negative aspect of teaching and learning English in Bangladesh. The scenario can be presented as-

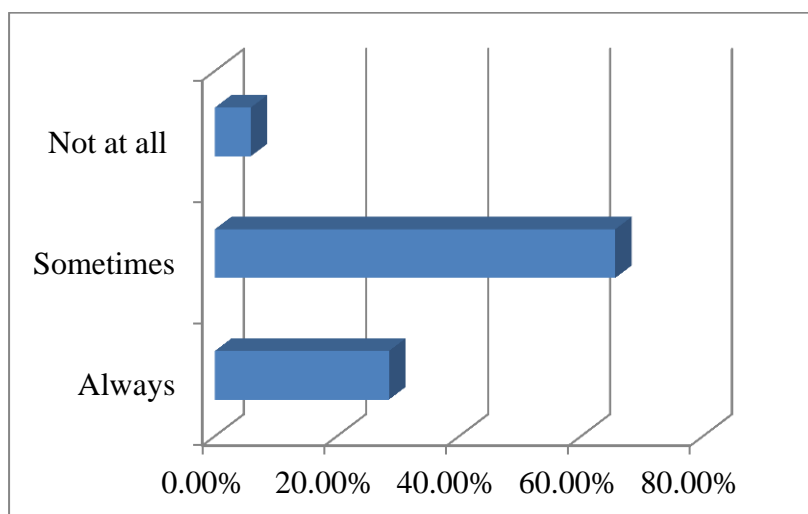


Figure 03: Attention level of the students in English classes

It was also noted that 55.4% students mentioned 'overcrowded classroom' was the main reason of their inattentiveness in the English classes. Again 53.8% students mentioned 'unplanned lessons' was the reason of their inattentiveness in the class. And again 37.3% students mentioned 'boring lectures', and 19.1% students mentioned 'lack of interest' were the reasons of their inattentiveness in the English classes.

Lack of trained teachers

The teachers are not well trained to handle CLT classroom and extension of CLT as TBLT and CLL classroom. From the teachers' interview, it was found that 60% teachers had ELT training while 40% teachers had no ELT

training. But the fact that, 100% urban teachers had ELT training and 50% suburban teachers had training whereas only about 29% rural teachers had ELT training. It was also noted that most of the English teachers were not graduated in English rather they were from other disciplines. So, they have not proper idea about the teaching procedures and methods.

Teachers' over use of Bengali in the English classroom

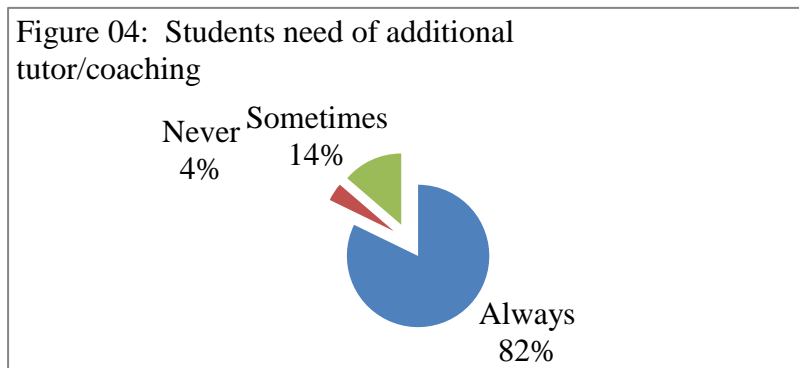
In the English classroom, English should be the medium of instruction and mother tongue can be used sometimes to make understand the difficult topics. But it was found from the survey that, teachers over used Bengali in the English classroom since we come to know (item no. 09) that 65.2% teachers used 'around 60%' Bengali in the English classes, another 32.6% students viewed that their English teachers use 'around 50%' Bengali, and only 2.2% students responded that their teachers used 'around 30%' Bengali in the English classes. It is a negative scenario since too much switching codes pollutes successful language learning.

Lack of group or cooperative learning activities

Group or cooperative learning activities were not practised in the classes as we have found that (responses of item no. 10) Only 4.1% students responded that, their teachers 'very often' involved them in pair or group learning activities, and 42.2% students responded that their teachers 'sometimes' involved them in pair or group works whereas 53.7% students responded that their teachers 'not at all' involved them in pair or group learning activities that a negative scenario for ELT (English Language Teaching) in Bangladesh.

Insufficient classroom practice

The students were not satisfied with the classroom practice done by the teachers since it was found that 82.2% students responded (in response to item no. 12) that, they 'always' need additional tutor/coaching. It indicates that their classroom practice done by the class teacher is not sufficient. The scenario is presented as:



It was informed by the teachers that most of them are involved in additional coaching/tuition as they are not well paid by the institutions/government, that economic insolvency forces them to engage in such work and it has negative impact on classroom teaching.

Four language skills are not equally emphasized

From the teachers' and students' data, it is found that four language skills were not equally emphasized rather listening and speaking skills were less emphasized in the class whereas reading and writing skills were more emphasized. In response to item no. 08, Only 12.9% students responded that 'listening skill' was practiced in their class, and 13.7% students responded that 'speaking skill' is practiced in their class whereas 67% students opined that 'reading skill' is practiced in their class and 87.4% students viewed that 'writing skill' is practiced in their class. So, it is noted that reading and writing skills were practised more while listening and speaking skills were ignored and less practiced.

Unfavorable classroom environment

It is found that the classrooms were very large. The classes seemed to be overcrowded and they very often failed to control the too large class. Most of the students and teachers were not satisfied with the classroom culture and learning environment. The teachers mentioned that the classroom size is too large to control and very often unmanageable that hampers the class. To find out answer to item no. 11, it is noted that 38.2% students were totally dissatisfied with the classroom culture and learning environment and 54.8% students were 'partially' satisfied with the classroom culture and learning environment while only 7% students were satisfied with the classroom culture and learning environment.

Faulty syllabus

The syllabus is not standard since textbook is not reflected in the testing system. None of the teachers responded that the syllabus is 'very useful', rather they mentioned the faulty sides of the syllabus. They mentioned that there is a huge gap between the objectives of the syllabus and outcome from the syllabus. Moreover, it is far away from practical usage of English.

Faulty testing system

From the teachers' interview, it was found that the testing system neglects listening and speaking skills and the syllabus is not reflected properly in the testing system. One of the objectives of the current syllabus is to develop four language skills but in testing system these are not reflected. Moreover, 78.9% teachers did not support the existing testing system. They mentioned that in the existing testing system, there is no scope to test students' listening and speaking skills.

Exam centered teaching and learning ignoring practicality

The teachers are more careful to make the students prepare for the examination since most of the teachers responded that their classroom activities were mainly exam-centered rather than skill- focused. This result-oriented teaching and learning activities will not be helpful to use English in practical life.

CONCLUSION

The researcher had fixed three research questions to find out the factors that were responsible for the ESL/EFL learners' poor performance in English. The affective factors are learners' psychological factors, teachers' factors, factors related to teaching procedures, teaching and learning environment, syllabus and curriculum.

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