

Challenges of Linguistic Transition at Tertiary Level: Case of a Private University in Bangladesh

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***Abstract:** The paper aims to identify the linguistic barriers and challenges first year undergraduate students confront at American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB), one of the leading private universities in Bangladesh. The paper seeks to investigate the impact of such linguistic transition, which is from Bengali to English, on the students' performance in tertiary environment. The paper is an exploratory study. Following case study methodology and utilizing a blend of qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (survey) approach it has been found that first year students face negative experiences and greater degree of difficulty in adapting English as medium of instruction. Another significant finding of the study is that such constraint of linguistic transition is negatively associated with the social transition of first year students at the university. In this regard, the teaching method, course content and quality of English language study at primary, secondary and higher secondary level of education has a vital role to make this transition smooth.*

***Keywords:** tertiary education, linguistic transition; English; medium of instruction*

Introduction

Private universities of Bangladesh brought about a remarkable innovation in Bangladesh higher education through introducing English medium of instruction. As all the public universities of Bangladesh adopt Bengali as medium of instruction, this linguistic transition at private universities not only brought a new horizon at tertiary level education but also became a subject of major concern (Rouf, 2012). Through the shift of medium of instruction from Bengali to English the private universities aim to provide education with international standard and also encourage student mobility. Nevertheless, the reality of such linguistic transition needs to be

explored. In Bangladesh, most of first year students accomplish their secondary and higher secondary education under Bengali medium of instruction. The shift of medium of instruction at tertiary level might not be a smooth journey for all of them and this could also create a barrier to their academic performance. Thereby, the purpose of the study is to identify the nature of the challenges first year business students at American International University Bangladesh, one of the leading private universities in Bangladesh, encounter due to English medium instruction.

Background

The study was conducted at American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) that offers English as medium of instruction in all the faculties. All the courses of the university are delivered in English. To meet the language requirements of the university, undergraduate students regardless of their discipline are required to undertake three English courses, namely English Reading and Public Speaking, English Writing, and Business Communication, in their first three semesters respectively. These courses are compulsory and designed with specific purpose: making first year undergraduate students competent in skills based academic English and also facilitating their adjustment to English medium instruction at the university.

Literature Review

The challenges of Linguistic transition from school to university have become a major area of study among researchers and scholars. It was before 1990 scholarly research was pretty much western world dominant addressing the difficulties domestic students experience while moving from school to university in the major English speaking countries (Evans & Morrison, 2011). However, due to global mobility the research focus shifted to international students in the last two decades. Growing research interest in the linguistic and cultural challenges of international students emerged among scholars (Evans & Morrison, 2011). In the recent years, the arena of such research inquiry has been extended to address the difficulties domestic students encounter while undertaking undergraduate program with foreign or second language medium of instruction (Yeh & Inose, 2003). Interestingly, comparative studies between local students' and international students' challenges to cope with second/ foreign medium of instruction suggest that both domestic and international students encounter almost similar sort of difficulties in their first year of the university. (Andrade, 2010).

A number of studies have been conducted to identify the impact of such transition in first year university students. Some suggest that transition from secondary to tertiary level requires students' adjusting to new environment, new teaching style, new approach to communication, and building networking among peer groups (Krigoz, 2009 cited in Rouf 2012). Following the same stream, Pargetter et al. (1999, cited in Rouf 2012) points out different learning environments, different perspective on discipline based knowledge and different teaching practices as the major challenges first year students confront. Often they face greater constraints to deal with all these issues. Research of McInnis & Jamesare (1996) suggest that adjusting to different teaching style, managing workloads and identifying the desired standard of English skills- all these lead to students' inability to embrace the new medium of instruction. Further to that, Kantanis (2000) emphasizes the role of social transition in students' adjustment in first year of the university. In this extent, social networking, a little more help from friends and peer group, social skills of team adaptability and communication competence play a vital role in dealing with the transition successfully. Another school of thought highlights that two factors are critical to facilitate students' smooth linguistic transition: improvement of university module design and teaching method of paying greater attention to students' learning capacity and skill (Macdonald et al., 2009 cited in Rouf, 2012).

English medium of instruction at tertiary level has increased significantly in the last two decades in Asia. In many Asian countries English is declared as the predominant foreign language. Bangladesh is not also an exception to this. It may be noted that all the studies discussed and reviewed above were conducted addressing either western or oriental university context. There is no evidence of critical analysis of the potential impact of ineffective linguistic transition in Bangladeshi higher education. Very few researches have been conducted on perceived challenges of English medium instruction in Bangladesh. Indeed, here lies the originality of the current paper.

Research Methodology

The study, first of all, utilizes case study methodology. Being exploratory in nature, it combines both quantitative and qualitative approach. The sample for the survey was 125 students and for semi-structured interview the focus group consisted of 20 students. Employing 'purposeful

sampling' strategy (Evans & Morrison, 2011) the study selects only students from Faculty of Business Administration for sampling. All the participants belonged to either first or second semester. 125 participants completed a 15- item questionnaire in which question items were designed addressing four areas of English language skill: academic writing, reading listening, and speaking skills. And the quantitative data were analyzed employing descriptive statistics computation. However, the comments written by students while the answering survey questionnaires were analyzed qualitatively.

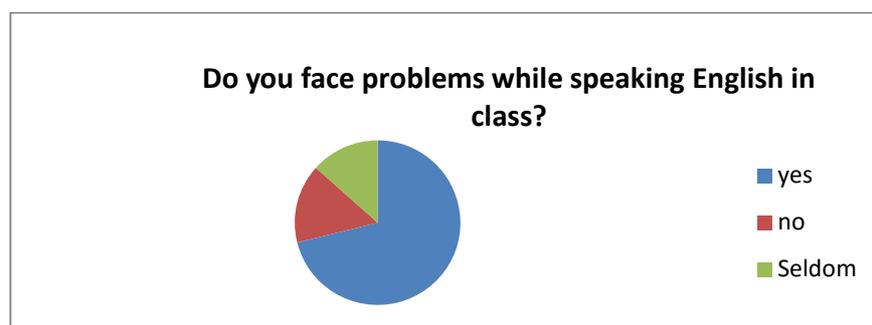
Findings and Analysis

A general finding from both the survey and semi-structured interview is that students particularly from Bengali medium colleges confront greater degree of challenges. In respond to question on speaking skill 44% participants expressed their concern about difficulty in speaking English. While conducting semi structured interviews, one participant articulates in this context:

“I remain silent in the class. It's not that I don't want to be a part of the discussion. Instead, most of the times I can't find the right word to express in English.”

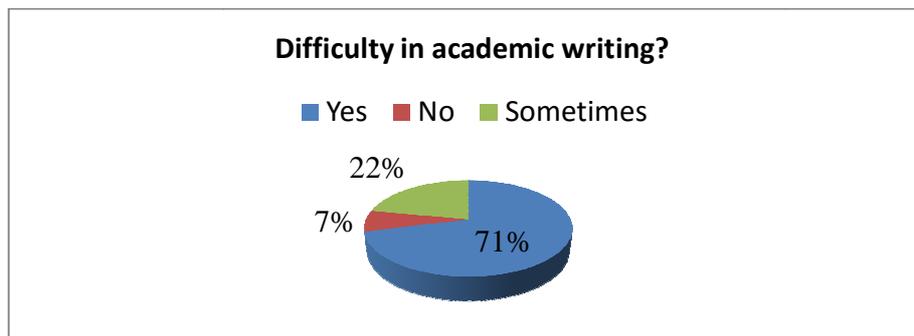
Many students remarked that giving presentation in English was the biggest challenge they experience in speaking area, as one participant responds:

“It's not an easy task for me to speak English in class as I am not at all used to public speaking English...what is mostly difficult for me is giving presentation in the class as I have to speak English thoroughly in front of the whole class and I am afraid of making mistakes.”



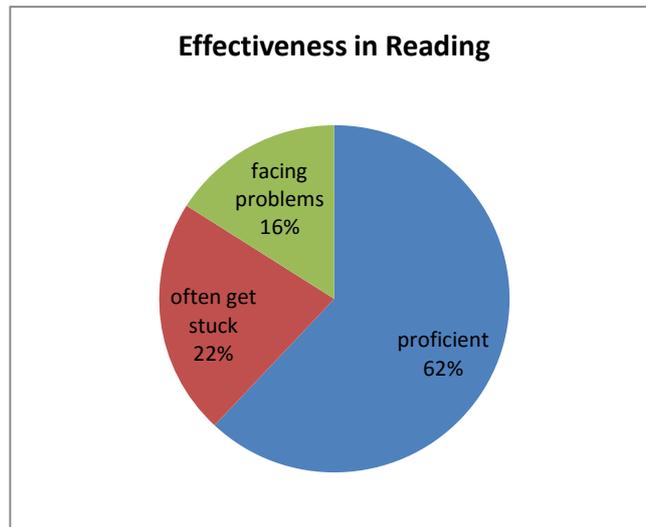
While conducting semi-structured interview, a number of issues related to the participants' lack of fluency in English have been identified. Inability to make a meaningful sentence and difficulty in choosing correct words revealed as the most common difficulty the respondents go through. Apart from this, a significant percentage of participants (47%) indicate that they feel shy, nervous and often they are afraid of speaking English in lectures. And 69% students indicated that due to hesitation and linguistic nervousness they avoid asking questions to teachers and deliberately avoid interacting with the lecturer as they have to speak English. Another reason behind such notion is having the feeling of inferiority in the class. More precisely, students from Bengali medium education feel incompetent and less confident since they feel that their spoken English is not as fluent as those from English medium in the class. One of the participants in the semi-structured interview states:

“Initially I wanted to speak in the class... but soon I realized some students started making fun of my pronunciation and sentence structure....which was frustrating as well...”

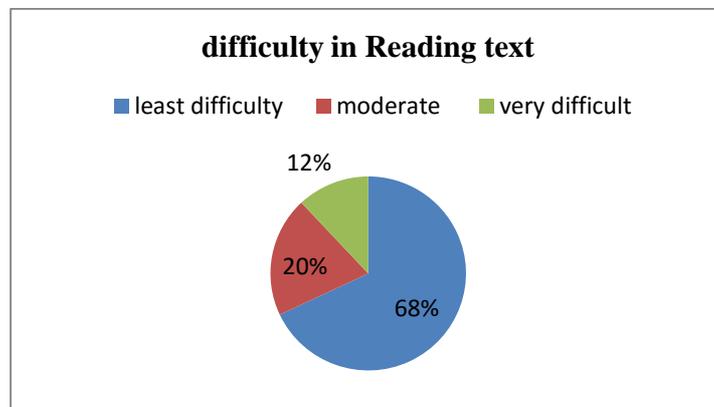


Surprisingly, Writing has been perceived as the most difficult and challenging by the target students. 71% respondents experience difficulties in academic writing convention. A number of issues have been identified in this regard. Using inappropriate words in academic writing, inability to express ideas in correct English, tendency to translate the word from English to Bengali or vice-versa, poor knowledge on grammatical structure for sentence making and spelling error – these are found as the most challenging issues students confront while writing. Interestingly, majority of the students expressed negative opinion in terms of having trouble in

understanding disciplinary terminology. Instead, they face greater degree of difficulty in understanding general academic vocabulary.



Responding to the question of listening skill 68% respondent did not face any difficulty with listening lectures and understanding lecturer’s accent; while 20% mentioned they seldom confront such listening problems and only 12% respondents indicate their hardship in listening class lectures. Contributory factors to 12% students’ listening problems are very limited stock of words or vocabulary and also not having adequate practice of listening English until they step into the university. As a result, they found it difficult to catch up the lesson in English.



With regard to reading, a number of questions related to reading skill were asked. In response to the question the students' assessment of their effectiveness in reading 62% students responded in the positive, while 22% participants indicate sometimes they get stuck in the middle of reading the text and 16% respondents perceived they were at disadvantage of effective reading. From focus group discussion and open questions of the survey it is visible that most of the target students experience hardship in reading by dint of being unfamiliar with vocabulary. In this context, one respondent makes comment: *"While reading I come across so many unfamiliar words in just one page.... I get lost with the flow and sequence of reading as I had to keep myself busy with finding the meaning of those bundle of words....this is very tiring."*

This reveals the students' difficulty in framing meaning while reading. Furthermore, their coping strategy of translating English words into Bengali and then again translate it back to English is, indeed, ineffective and leading to their frustration in reading.

Interestingly, 90% respondents feel that they need more practice and exposure in all four areas of English including speaking, reading, writing and listening. This refers to the learners' positive perception about the requirement of their improvement in English. What badly they need is motivational support and enough room to practice these skills in every possible way. They were not given adequate learning environment in their secondary and higher secondary education. While answering a question on gap analysis 95% participants feel that their English language experience at secondary and higher secondary level was not good enough to make themselves proficient in English. Consequently, they are encountering difficulties in adjusting to the linguistic transition at university level. This highlights the perceived gap between Secondary/higher secondary level English and expected level of English proficiency from first year students at university.

Another significant finding of the study is that such constraint of linguistic transition is negatively associated with the social transition of first year students at the university. In the process of coping with the new environment of the campus, those from Bengali medium study encounter greater difficulty in English and they feel isolated from peer group. Particularly, those who are from English medium background or good at English do not make rapport with those Bengali medium students during group presentation, group assignment or even group discussion

in the class. As a result, they feel alienated, frustrated and inferior which might leave long term impact on their academic performance as well as mental wellbeing.

Implications of the study

Based on the interpretation of the survey result and focus group discussion a number of challenges are identified and discussed. Indeed, to negotiate the challenges a number of initiatives are required. Although currently the university is offering three compulsory English courses with up to date communicative language teaching methodology (CLT) in order to enhance first year students' skills based English, significant number of students are unable to meet the expected learning outcomes. In this regard, the strategy of screening the students' performance in those three courses can be applied. In doing so, tracking of those students who are unable to attain standard level of English proficiency will be viable. Motivational counseling by faculties as well as offering of non-credit course on English could help them significantly in overcoming their difficulty to adjusting to the English medium study. In this regard, one of the key influencing factors needs to be reinforced: that is to make them perceive the significance of English in their future career. Once they realize the relevance and benefit of English competency in Business and corporate world, they will likely be interested and self-motivated to be a better performer. Moreover, this will also shape students' positive perception of English as an effective medium of instruction and this is needless to mention that students' perception is essentially important in effective implementation of English medium instruction at tertiary level. Finally, With regard to social transition of students, peer collaboration and supportive environment to enforce English from classroom to everyday life, and equal participation in seminar and group work is essentially required in order to ensure students' psychological wellbeing and generate positive effects on academic performance.

In reality, university led initiative will not be enough to mend all the linguistic difficulties. From the result of the survey it is evident that most of the affected students lack basic English, including grammar, sentence making structure and correct spelling. Hence, the root cause of experiencing such linguistic challenges at tertiary level needs to be investigated thoroughly. In such point, the design and effective implementation of English course curriculum at primary, secondary and higher secondary level needs to be taken into account as students' foundation of

English skill is built at these three levels. Hence, the teaching method, course content and quality of English language study at primary, secondary and higher secondary level of education has a vital role to make this transition smooth.

Conclusion

The study is an insightful attempt to investigate and identify the challenges that first year business students experience while shifting the education to English-medium tertiary level education at tertiary level. The findings of the study suggest that the challenges of linguistic transition at tertiary level need to be dealt carefully at university, national and individual level. Concerted initiative and effort from faculty members, government and students can turn difficulties of linguistic transition to a success. Otherwise, the attempt to use English as a medium of instruction will be unlikely to implement successfully in higher education. Finally, in the world of global competitiveness and internationalization there is no alternative of English medium of instruction especially at tertiary level if graduates aspire to be a part of international exposure and to gain competitive advantage in global employability.

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