Language Policy and English Education in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research article provides a critical analysis of the intricate relationship between language policy and English education in Bangladesh. With a diverse linguistic landscape comprising Bengali, English, and indigenous languages, the study delves into the historical evolution of language policies from pre-independence to the present day. The impact of socio-economic dynamics and cultural influences on English language education is examined, considering factors such as access to quality education, language proficiency, and the role of English as a global language. Government initiatives and challenges in implementing language policies are scrutinized, providing insights into curriculum frameworks, teacher training, and societal attitudes. The implications of these policies on English education, including proficiency levels, employment prospects, and international competitiveness, are critically analyzed. The article concludes by offering recommendations for refining language policies, fostering linguistic diversity, and addressing emerging challenges in the evolving educational landscape of Bangladesh. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on language policy and education, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in balancing linguistic diversity with the global importance of English in the context of Bangladesh.

 Keywords: Bangladesh; English language; English education; Education policy

INTRODUCTION:

Due to its undeniable significance in human capital development within an increasingly globalized world, English is widely recognized for its immense potential for individuals and societies. Engagement with the global economy now requires the acceptance of English as crucial for accessing the global market. Consequently, numerous countries in Asia, including South East Asian nations, have incorporated the teaching and learning of English into their education policies, adapting to the realities of a more globally connected world. These countries fear that incompetence in English may hinder their economic advantage in the era of globalization, where English plays a major role.

For instance, in 2001, the Chinese government introduced English as a compulsory subject in Class 3 in all elementary schools and mandated public colleges and universities to use English as the main teaching language for technology and business-related subjects. This move facilitated China's integration into the English-speaking world, influencing trade, commerce, education, and politics. In the Indian subcontinent, the adoption of the British education system during colonial rule aimed to use education as a political tool to prolong British domination. Even though nearly 80 years have passed since colonial rule ended, current-day Bangladesh still exhibits a noticeable continuity with the colonial period in terms of the use, teaching, and learning of the English language. Simultaneously, friction between English and nationalistic support for Bengali often emerges in popular rhetoric, creating challenging tensions in formulating language policies.

Research has extensively shown that education policy in Bangladesh has been entangled in vested political interests since its emergence as an independent nation in 1971. Scholars have reported a general lack of policy direction in the education sector, characterized by fragmented and inconsistent policy and practice.

The quality of education in Bangladesh has been criticized as stagnant, inadequate, outdated, and unproductive. This article critically examines the major trends in English education policies enacted over four decades of reform in Bangladesh, highlighting the perceived statuses of English and Bengali to elucidate the ongoing clash between the two languages.

The article traces the slow development of national education policies in Bangladesh back to the 200-year British colonial period, culminating in the 2010 Education Policy, a result of trial and error involving multiple committees and commissions since the country's independence. Despite policy differences, a consistent emphasis has been placed on reinforcing the emotive rhetoric of national identity forged in the Liberation War of 1971. This sentiment closely ties to the powerful unifying factor of the nation's linguistic identity. The article presents a brief chronology of education policy and commissions, exploring shifts in emphasis on English over four decades and discussing the implications for the current global context. It concludes with a discussion on the findings' implications and suggestions for fostering an education system that balances heritage and modernity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

This critical assessment is predicated on the qualitative study of several policy documents (1971–present) developed by Bangladesh's state governments in the field of education. A number of national education policies and commission reports were included in the policy documents. These included the reports from the Bangladesh Education Commission (1974), the English Teaching Taskforce Commission (1976), the Bangladesh National Education Commission (1988), the National Curriculum Committee (1991), the National Education Policy (2000), the Bari Commission Report (2002), the Miah Commission Report (2004), and the National Education Policy (2010). Policy documents can be viewed as key materials (Prior 2011) to investigate the evolution of English education historically and the role English has played in Bangladesh's educational system. We have asked constructivist "why" questions (Darlaston-Jones 2007) in place of positivist "what" inquiries in an effort to uncover underlying ideologies and power dynamics ingrained in the reports and policies. With the use of this method, we were able to look beyond the documents' physical form and acquire understanding of the political and sociocultural environments in which these policy documents were produced.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH:

The relative significance of a local language and English is not fixed, and neither can be inherently labeled as entirely positive or negative. It is not accurate to argue that advocating for the local language over English, or vice versa, necessarily undermines the integrity of either language. Cultural and national identity is inevitably intertwined with language. However, complications arise when examining how English has historically been portrayed as adversarial rather than complementary to Bangladesh's national identity and educational framework. Critics assert that this perspective may stem from a lingering colonial mindset, influencing the implementation of education policies that prioritize the promotion of English throughout the country's educational system. The persistent tension between Bengali and English, evident in both policy and practice, as well as in the fundamental cultural disposition of the nation, has left lasting wounds in the formulation of a widely accepted language policy to date.

The 2003 National Education Commission (NEC) highlighted the detrimental impact of the lack of a clear language policy on higher education, describing it as approaching a crisis (Rahman 2010, p. 93). In response, the Commission recommended urgent formulation of a National Language Policy to address the confusion, particularly in higher education. The government, aiming to balance English and Bengali in national policies, made English a compulsory subject from Classes 1 to 12 in the national curriculum. With

over 17 million children learning English, Bangladesh boasts one of the world's largest primary second language (L2) English populations (Hamid & Honan 2012, p. 141).

Despite Bangladesh's modest per capita income and Human Development Index ranking, the commitment to English is considered both ambitious and reasonable, given its association with social and economic development in a globalized world. In Bangladesh, English serves as an international link language rather than a tool for interpersonal communication, yet it has become integral to the country's socio-cultural and economic life.

While English is compulsory in schools, students' performance remains generally poor (Chowdhury & Kamal 2014), with reports indicating that the average university student's English language skill level is equivalent to Class 7 (Imam 2005). In response, the government introduced Communicative English Teaching (CLT) in Class 6 in 1996, gradually extending it up to Class 12. External projects, such as the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) and the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP), funded by international organizations, aim to enhance English education, along with initiatives by non-government organizations like BRAC.

Notably, the government's English in Action (EIA) project, launched in 2008 with assistance from the Department of International Development (DFID, UK), targets 30 million people, emphasizing English as a tool for economic engagement. The project involves TV and radio programs, teacher training, and institutional capacity development. The privatization of primary and secondary education led to the Private University Act in 1992, allowing private universities to use English as the medium of instruction. Public universities, facing increasing competition, have also adopted English in various departments, viewing it as a pathway to global academic standards, facilitated by credit-transfer arrangements with English-speaking countries.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE POLICIES:

Historically, even during the period of British rule in the Indian subcontinent from 1757 to 1947, English was not deemed essential at the primary level. Throughout the era of Pakistan (1947-1971), it served as the 'link language' between the linguistically diverse East and West Pakistans. However, English was not a mandatory subject in primary schools and certainly not the medium of instruction. The Language Movement of 1952, when East Pakistan resisted the imposition of Urdu as the sole national language, played a pivotal role in shaping Bangladesh's history, leading to the Liberation War of 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh. This marked the end of the multilingual character of divided Pakistan and the adoption of a monolingual identity for the first time.

The lingering political influence of the 1952 Language Movement still resonates today, with Bengali playing a sentimental role in national identity formation. This sentiment is evident in the ongoing language struggle between Bengali and English at both the policy level and in everyday communication.

In 1972, the Constitution granted Bengali the status of the sole national language for administration, judiciary, and as the medium of instruction in education. English was to be taught only from Classes 6 to 12, and higher education was to be exclusively delivered in Bengali. However, over the next decade, policymakers began to recognize the adverse impact of such nationalist policies on English teaching and learning.

In 1976, the English Teaching Task Force recommended introducing English in either Class 3 or Class 6. The National Curriculum Committee, in 1976, made English a compulsory subject from Class 3.Subsequent recommendations and reforms in 1991 and 1992 gradually increased the prominence of Englishin the curriculum.

Notably, the 2000 National Education Policy initially considered English as the medium of instruction for kindergartens, suggesting its introduction as a compulsory subject from Class 3. The 2003 National Education Commission emphasized learning English from the primary level, aiming to improve language skills through overseas and local training programs.

The 2010 National Education Policy placed greater importance on English education, aiming to build a knowledge-based and information technology-oriented society. The policy recommended steps to enhance English writing and speaking skills from the primary level, making English a compulsory subject in higher education alongside Bengali. It also emphasized translating English books into Bengali to meet international standards.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENGLISH EDUCATION:

By critically examining the historical progression of English in successive national policies, this paper aims to reconsider how the government and education policymakers in Bangladesh perceive the status of English. The analysis reveals persistent tensions between English and Bengali, especially in light of its historical significance related to the country's independence and the enthusiastic public sentiment it generates. Drawing on insights from policy document analysis and a thorough literature review, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers and educators in Bangladesh to narrow the gaps between the two languages and formulate a language policy aligned with the nation's educational principles.

The two-century-long British colonial rule and its politically motivated regressive education policy left Bangladesh without a timely and appropriate policy direction, with a misplaced emphasis on less crucial matters. In this elitist education system, English became the sole medium for administration, judicial work, and media communication. English medium schools were established to produce generations of privileged yet subordinate native individuals for roles in administration and power professions. The remnants of colonial mentality persist in postcolonial Bangladesh, as evidenced by Kachru's (1998) report on the British Council's vested interests in maintaining the role of English. Some policymakers view English as a tool of continuing colonial imperialism, leading to efforts to decolonize the education system. However, conflicting viewpoints among policymakers have perpetuated English as exclusive education for a privileged group, resulting in an "elitist" curriculum, as argued by Rahman (2010). This elitism has created barriers for students with inadequate English skills in pursuing higher education.

To address these challenges, the English education policy must transcend nationalistic and elitist mentalities and be recognized as a truly global language rather than one dominating socio-politics and the educational system. Furthermore, the global prominence of English has prompted significant shifts in education policies worldwide. In Asia, many countries, including Bangladesh, have acknowledged English as an official language or a priority foreign language to compete globally. Despite this, the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical workplace experiences has hindered Bangladesh's industrial workforce in the global job market. Policymakers must reconsider the English curriculum to bridge existing gaps in tertiary education.

Lastly, the current government, in power since 2009 and focused on transforming the country into a 'Digital Bangladesh,' underscores the need for an English education mechanism in the national system. English education can serve as a key vehicle to align the younger generation with the global knowledge system,

essential for the demands of the new Asian Century and the government's vision for a digitally connected Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION:

The intricate interplay of various factors influencing successive governments' education priorities in relation to English education in Bangladesh has been observed. The relationship between policy makers and researchers is described as a 'fragile dialogue,' drawing inspiration from Unterhalter et al. (2003). This paper has focused on the cultural, linguistic, and historical narratives shaping education, exploring the potential for a system that harmonizes heritage and modernity, rather than delving into the politics of policy planning and implementation.

Unterhalter et al. (2003) express regret that research and policy critique often fail to reach education practitioners and administrators, while academics and researchers face challenges in engaging with 'strong political rhetoric,' hindering meaningful dialogue. Despite this, a retrospective analysis of language policy within the context of the nation's historical and cultural discourses reveals signs of progress and more favorable conditions for the emergence of new spaces. The continuous development of policies and curriculum directives builds on past generations' legacy, posing a challenge for educational language policy beyond resolving conflicts between national tradition and global influences, or between Bengali and English.

As argued by Imam (2005), English competence alone is insufficient without sustained local socio-economic strength and strategically competent political leadership. Curricular reforms are advocated to make education more job-oriented, localized, and problem-oriented, aiming to intellectually and economically empower the masses. The tension between Bengali and English calls for a renewed push for 'universal literacy' in both languages, rejecting compromise in favor of one over the other. Imam emphasizes the need for a space that nurtures the evolution of a distinctively 'Bangladeshi style' of English, infused with national characteristics.

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