

Bridging the English Proficiency Gap: The Higher Education Challenges of Bangla-Medium Students in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges Bangla-medium students in Bangladesh face when transitioning to English-based higher education. Despite over a decade of English instruction, many struggle with comprehension, academic writing, and classroom engagement due to exam-oriented learning, ineffective pedagogy, and limited exposure to spoken English. Socioeconomic disparities further widen the language gap, restricting access to English-medium education and supplementary learning resources. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews with 15 students, teachers, and guardians explored their experiences. Thematic analysis identified key barriers, including reliance on rote memorization, limited communicative teaching, and inconsistent language use in universities. The findings highlight the need for curriculum reforms, teacher training in communicative methods, structured university support, and targeted policy interventions to improve students' academic success and career readiness.

Keywords: English language learning, higher education, Bangla-medium students, language transition, communicative language teaching, curriculum reform, Bangladesh, academic success.

Introduction

English proficiency is crucial for academic and professional success in Bangladesh, yet students from Bangla-medium backgrounds struggle to transition to English-based higher education. Despite 12 years of English instruction, many lack speaking, listening, and academic writing skills, making it difficult to engage with university coursework (Rahman &

Pandian, 2018). This gap hinders academic performance, limits career prospects, and reduces global competitiveness.

Bangladesh's exam-centric curriculum prioritizes rote memorization over communicative competence, leaving students unprepared for real-world language use (Ahmad & Rao, 2012). While English Medium Instruction (EMI) is widely adopted in universities, its implementation is inconsistent, with many lecturers and students struggling due to limited

proficiency (Sarker et al., 2021). Additionally, teacher training gaps exacerbate the issue, as most educators rely on grammar-translation methods rather than communicative approaches, further hindering fluency (Karim & Mohamed, 2019).

To compensate, students turn to self-directed learning, such as digital language tools and English-language media, but these methods are often unstructured and insufficient for academic success (Kukulka-Hulme et al., 2023). The impact extends beyond academics, as English proficiency is a key determinant of employability and socioeconomic mobility (Benson, 2002), yet the education system fails to equip students for an English-dominated professional environment.

This study explores the challenges, systemic barriers, and potential solutions to bridging the language gap. By analyzing student, teacher, and guardian perspectives, it identifies actionable strategies to enhance English education and support Bangla-medium students in higher education.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges Bangla-medium students face when transitioning to English-based higher education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants—seven students, five guardians, and three teachers—providing diverse perspectives on language learning barriers and adaptation strategies.

The study addressed the central question: What challenges do Bangla-medium students face in adapting to English-based education, and how can their language proficiency be improved?

Supporting sub-questions examined:

1. Difficulties in gaining knowledge through English.
2. Current methods of English learning in schools and colleges.

3. Barriers to effective English learning.
4. Potential support systems for English proficiency.
5. Institutional and policy-level obstacles to reform.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's focus. Interviews, conducted in person and via phone, lasted approximately 30 minutes. Data were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in language transition, academic challenges, and institutional support gaps. This research adhered to American Psychological Association (2017), ensuring informed consent, participant confidentiality, and secure data storage.

Findings

Exam-Centric Learning and Its Limitations

Students reported that English instruction in Bangla-medium schools focused heavily on grammar and vocabulary drills, with minimal attention to speaking or listening. Teachers acknowledged that preparing students for standardized exams took priority, reinforcing English as a subject to pass rather than a skill to develop.

As a result, students graduated with little exposure to practical English use, making it difficult to comprehend lectures, participate in discussions, or write effectively. Many expressed frustration that despite years of English education, they felt unprepared for real-world communication.

Linguistic Barriers in Higher Education

The shift to English-based instruction in universities posed significant challenges. Students struggled to follow lectures, engage in discussions, and complete assignments. Some relied on translation tools or peer support, but these strategies often led to misinterpretations.

Faculty responses were inconsistent. Some instructors used Bangla alongside English to aid comprehension, while others enforced full English immersion. Students reported that this

lack of uniformity created additional confusion, leaving them uncertain about how to navigate their learning environment.

Impact on Academic Performance and Confidence

Students stated that language difficulties directly affected their academic performance, making it difficult to articulate ideas in assignments and exams. Many who excelled in school found it challenging to maintain high grades in university due to struggles with structuring responses in English.

Confidence was another major concern. Several students admitted they avoided speaking in class or asking questions out of fear of making mistakes. A few even considered switching majors or dropping out, believing they could not meet the linguistic demands of their coursework.

Systemic Barriers to English Proficiency

- ***Ineffective Teaching Methods:*** Students recalled that their English classes were primarily textbook-based, offering little opportunity for real-world application. Teachers admitted that oral communication practice was rarely included.
- ***Shortage of Trained English Teachers:*** Many students noted that their teachers lacked fluency and frequently relied on Bangla explanations, limiting exposure to spoken English.
- ***Socioeconomic Barriers:*** Guardians emphasized that private English education was financially inaccessible, restricting access to quality instruction from an early age.
- ***Cultural and Institutional Resistance:*** Some parents were reluctant to prioritize English, fearing it would diminish the importance of Bangla. Students observed that policymakers had not taken proactive steps to bridge the gap between Bangla-medium schooling and English-based higher education.

Coping Strategies

Without structured institutional support, students turned to self-learning. Many watched English-language media, used mobile apps, or practiced with peers to improve fluency. However, these methods lacked structured feedback, making it difficult to develop strong academic writing and critical thinking skills.

First-year students faced the greatest challenges, balancing university coursework while struggling to strengthen their English proficiency. Many expressed frustrations at having to navigate this transition alone.

Expectations for Change

Students emphasized the need for schools to integrate more speaking and listening practice instead of focusing solely on grammar and exams. Teachers acknowledged the necessity of professional training in communicative teaching methods. Faculty members recognized that structured transition programs would ease the adjustment for Bangla-medium students.

Guardians supported expanding access to affordable English education initiatives, ensuring that students from all backgrounds could develop language proficiency. Across all groups, there was a shared belief that English should not be treated merely as an exam subject but as an essential skill for academic and professional success.

Discussion

The findings highlight a disconnect between secondary-level English instruction and university expectations. Despite over a decade of English education, Bangla-medium students struggle with comprehension, academic writing, and participation, as exam-driven instruction prioritizes rote memorization over communicative competence (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). While communicative language teaching (CLT) was introduced to replace grammar-translation methods, inadequate teacher training has resulted in

ineffective implementation, leaving students with theoretical knowledge but limited fluency (Karim & Mohamed, 2019).

Bangladesh's exam-centric curriculum reinforces passive learning, weakening students' ability to use English effectively. Similar issues in China and Japan show that high-stakes exams discourage interactive learning and limit communicative proficiency (Ahmad & Rao, 2012; Zhao, 2022). In Bangladesh, standardized assessments exclude essential language skills such as speaking and listening, preventing students from developing practical fluency (Karim & Mohamed, 2019). Students reported that language barriers, rather than subject knowledge, contribute to lower academic performance, reflecting the limitations of written assessments in developing key communication skills.

Bangla-medium students struggle with English-based instruction in universities, often relying on translation tools or peer support, which are insufficient for long-term academic success. Faculty responses vary; some alternate between Bangla and English, while others enforce full English immersion, creating inconsistency in students' learning experiences. Bilingual transition programs could help mitigate these challenges, yet such initiatives remain largely absent in Bangladesh (Sarker et al., 2021). Research from other non-English-speaking contexts shows that structured transition programs ease EMI adaptation, underscoring a critical gap in Bangladesh's higher education system (Benson, 2002).

Economic background significantly affects English proficiency. Similar disparities exist in other postcolonial contexts, where English proficiency is both a tool for social mobility and a barrier for disadvantaged students (Benson, 2002). In Bangladesh, English-medium education remains financially inaccessible, further widening the language gap. Limited teacher training compounds this issue, as many educators rely on Bangla explanations even in English lessons, restricting students' exposure to spoken English (Karim & Mohamed, 2019).

With minimal institutional support, students turn to self-directed learning by watching English-language media, using apps, and practicing informally. While these methods help improve fluency, they lack structured guidance and formal feedback, making progress inconsistent. First-year students face the greatest difficulty balancing coursework with language adaptation. Research suggests structured university support programs could mitigate these challenges, but such initiatives remain scarce (Karim & Mohamed, 2019). The absence of formal assistance further exacerbates disparities between Bangla-medium and English-medium students.

Without systemic reforms, the English proficiency gap will persist, limiting students' academic success and career prospects. Unlike countries that have adopted bilingual or communicative English models, Bangladesh continues to rely on outdated teaching methods that fail to equip students with functional language skills (Benson, 2002). English proficiency remains a privilege for those who can afford private education or tutoring. Without targeted interventions, Bangla-medium students will continue to face disadvantages in higher education and professional environments. These findings highlight the urgent need for curriculum reform, improved teacher training, and structured university support to create a more inclusive English learning system.

Recommendations

To bridge the language gap between Bangla-medium schooling and English-based higher education, reforms must address curriculum, teacher training, university support, and accessibility.

1. **Revise English Instruction in Schools:** Shift from exam-based learning to communicative English by integrating speaking, listening, and interactive exercises into the curriculum. Replace rote memorization with practical language assessments to enhance real-world proficiency.

2. **Enhance Teacher Training:** Require training in communicative teaching methods for English teachers in Bangla-medium schools. Implement continuous professional development to improve language proficiency and interactive teaching strategies.
3. **Establish University-Level Language Support:** Introduce bilingual transition programs for first-year students. Develop academic writing and speaking centers to provide structured language assistance, tutoring, and faculty development.
4. **Expand Access to English Learning:** Increase accessibility through low-cost or subsidized English programs for underprivileged students. Expand digital learning platforms and university partnerships to provide scalable, affordable training.
5. **Implement Policy-Level Reforms:** Adopt a phased national strategy to enhance English instruction across all educational levels. Facilitate collaboration among government, universities, and private institutions to improve English education policies and funding.

Conclusion

This study highlights the challenges Bangla-medium students face when transitioning to English-based higher education. Despite years of formal instruction, exam-driven learning, ineffective teaching methods, and limited communicative practice leave students struggling with English proficiency. Socioeconomic disparities further widen this gap, disadvantaging students without access to private tutoring or English-medium education.

Addressing these issues requires curriculum reform, improved teacher training, and structured university support to ensure students develop the English proficiency

needed for academic success and career advancement. Without intervention, these barriers will continue to restrict educational and professional opportunities for Bangla-medium students.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by its small sample size (15 participants), which may not fully capture the diverse experiences of Bangla-medium students. Additionally, the loss of interview transcripts required reconstructed thematic analysis, potentially affecting data depth.

Future research should use larger, more diverse samples and adopt longitudinal methods to track students' language adaptation over time. Investigating the effectiveness of bilingual transition programs, teacher training initiatives, and digital language tools could provide data-driven solutions for bridging the language gap. Comparative studies with other non-English-speaking countries would further inform best practices for English education reform in Bangladesh.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest and confirm that this research was conducted independently, without external funding or undue influence.

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