

Change initiatives in English in action intervened primary schools in Bangladesh

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This article presents the findings of a mixed approach study carried out in seven Bangladeshi primary schools under English In Action (EIA) intervention programme which aims to bring about changes in classroom practices of English teachers. Through teacher training, activity guides and other teaching aids for each grade, EIA prescribes idealized teaching practices for the teachers. This study explores how these teachers implement such practices in their actual classrooms. In order to find out if there is any change in their classroom practice because of the intervention, three different data sources i.e. classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with students have been used. Data have been analyzed under different themes. The findings show teachers are able to implement EIA principles and practices and thereby bring about changes in their traditional classroom practice. They, however, also admit that because of various situational constraints, implementation of these practices is not simple.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, students are learning English language as a compulsory subject from the 'earliest grade possible' i.e from Class/Grade 1 till Grade 12, and later at the tertiary level. (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008, p.16; Yasmin, 2005 & 2007). Yet the proficiency level of the students is far below the average. Consequently, in the 1990s Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has been imported as a methodology/approach to develop learners' communicative competence. (NCTB, 2003; Yasmin, 2009; Rahman et al., 2009; Roshid, 2009). It was expected that CLT would 'revitalize' the 'weak' learners' proficiency in English by 'improving the standard of teaching and learning English at different levels of formal education' (NCTB, 2003; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008, p.16; Roshid, 2009). But improvement in the proficiency level of the students is still 'far from satisfactory' (Roshid, 2009 ; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008 ; Rahman, 1999 & 1991). Among others, one crucially obvious reason is not implementing CLT principles in the classrooms, although teachers are supposed to do so (Yasmin 2009; Roshid, 2009; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). A massive effort of capturing what is happening in the English classrooms of primary and secondary levels in Bangladesh done by EIA in their Baseline Study-3 where 252 classrooms were observed further supplements the validity of the above reality. The study shows

"...most lessons observed did not encourage a communicative approach...The use of teaching aids (other than the textbook) was infrequently observed: in 2% to 6% of classes at any of the times sampled. Similarly, there were few occasions when individual students or groups were encouraged to speak in English: from 2% to 4% of

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classes at any of the times sampled. More frequently, teachers gave instructions for student activities (from 5% to 8% at any of the times sampled) or listened to students as they read aloud from the textbook (from 2% to 8% at any of the times sampled). Only infrequently did teachers explain something in English (from 0% to 5% at any of the times sampled).” (EIA, 2008, p. i)

So it is obvious that although the Ministry of Education has been trying to implement CLT approach in Bangladesh for more than a decade through teacher training and textbook writing projects like English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), and others, there is hardly any improvement in English teaching-learning process.

Under such circumstances, EIA was introduced in 2008 in response to an appeal from the government of Bangladesh for international support to augment the proficiency in the use of English language of the people of the country.

English in Action (EIA)

EIA is an international English language proficiency development programme for the people of Bangladesh. It is being financed by a budget from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and implemented by the government of Bangladesh. It is being delivered by a partnership which includes the Open University, UK and the BBC World Service Trust.

As a part of the planned intervention, EIA is working for English language teacher development at primary and secondary sectors of Bangladesh so that these teachers can implement CLT principles in their classrooms and thereby develop 'communicative competence' (Hyme 1971, 1966) of the students.

Teachers' Professional Development By EIA

As Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) and Thompson (1996) put it if teachers are not properly oriented to the use of CLT, they rarely practice it in the classroom and follow traditional Grammar-Translation method, which failed to develop the four language skills. The same is applicable to the English teachers of Bangladesh. (see Yasmin 2009; Roshid, 2009; Rahman et al., 2009; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Considering this certainly crucial point, EIA in their pilot phase (2010-2011) has trained primary school teachers of 22 pilot Upazilas of Bangladesh for more than a year so that they can be properly exposed to the principles and techniques of CLT and use them in their classroom practice.

Teacher training provided by EIA targets to bring pedagogical change in the classroom. It is enabling teachers to use new technologies and materials so that they can teach English in a more participatory and communicative way. Teachers are given media-players (iPods) which are preloaded with video and audio language learning resources, along with speakers (namely Block-rockers, Logitech) for using in the classroom as teaching aids and to support the practice of listening and speaking skills. They are provided with flash-cards, figurines and posters. Besides these, they are also handed over a planned *Activity Guide* for each grade so that they can prepare themselves lesson-wise and can take each lesson in a planned and disciplined way. On the other hand, for teacher training and development a 'blended' support system for teachers has been developed which includes an orientation workshop, cluster meetings of teachers once a month, a pair of EIA teachers from each school, school visits from EIA trainers giving feedback, and technical assistance (Shohel & Banks, 2010, p. 5485).

The Objectives of the Study

The study has been conducted to explore

- changes, if there is any, in the classroom practices of the primary school teachers because of

- the intervention offered by EIA.
- the extent to which these teachers are implementing such practices in their actual classrooms.
- the challenges they are facing in this regard.

Method

This is a mixed approach research with both qualitative and quantitative data. The major tool used in this study was classroom observation. Seven out of ten EIA intervened schools in Laxmipur upazilla were visited. In total, thirteen lessons of thirteen different English teachers were observed. Lessons are either from Grade 1 or Grade 3. The reason for such choice is at the very beginning of the intervention these teachers were provided with teaching aids like Activity Guide, poster, flash cards, figurines and audio materials based on Grade 1 and 3 textbooks.

Data have also derived from thirteen semi-structured interviews with the teachers and seven FGDs with students. The above three sources of data were analyzed following grounded theory procedures to identify recurring and salient themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Analysis and Findings

1) Classroom-observations

The observations were done applying a ‘timed observation schedule’ which helped in providing information on the frequency of English usage, classroom interaction, the frequency of the use of methods and materials in the classroom, classroom-management etc.

The duration of the lessons observed had variety ranging from 24 minutes to 36 minutes. Total duration of all 13 lessons was 327 minutes. So the average duration of the lessons was slightly more than 25 minutes.

a) Findings from Classroom-Observations

As mentioned above, EIA has adopted CLT approach to develop language skills of the learners. Accordingly, teachers under EIA intervention have been instructed to use CLT principles in the classroom.

In the areas like using various activities, engaging students, reducing teacher-talk, using more English than L1 (Bangla) and audio-visual materials to aid teaching-learning in the classroom, considerable improvement has been noticed within a short period of time measured against the English In Action Baseline Study 3 (2008) and other related studies. (See Yasmin 2009; Roshid, 2009; Rahman et al., 2009; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). The findings are pretty similar to those of the study done by Shohel and Banks (2010) in the EIA intervened secondary schools (UCEP schools).

i) Activities done in the Classrooms: It was observed that following the principles of CLT, the teachers tried different activities in the classrooms so that engagement of students could be maximised in all the four areas of language skills. The activities include pair-works, group-works, responding in chorus etc. Students were also seen to answer individually to teachers’ questions in some cases. The table below shows the frequency of using different activities in the classroom.

Table 1: Frequency of Using Different Activities

| Number of Lessons observed | Total Duration of All Lessons | Activities/Areas | Frequency of Use |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| 13 | 327 min | Pair work | 19 |
| | | Group work | 4 |
| | | Working in Chorus | 86 |
| | | Working Individually | 80 |
| | | Reading | 11 |
| | | Writing | 12 |
| | | Listening to audio | 48 |

Different games like bingo game, using tennis ball to play a kind of game were also found to be used to make lessons lively and to ensure participation of students.

The ever new skill that is now in practice as observed is listening skill (using iPod). All thirteen lessons started with either *Good-morning song* or *Hello-song* and ended with *Good-bye song* along with lesson related listening activities when and where applicable. The frequency of trying listening skill is also very impressive as it can be seen from the above table.

ii) Ratio of Teacher-Student Talk: No classroom showed traditional teacher-centredness. In fact, student-talk greatly outweighs teacher-talk. ‘Timed observation schedule’ indicates the duration of student-talk was nearly 70%. Furthermore, most teacher-talk was related to presenting lessons and organizing the class. However, asking questions to teachers by the students was rarely observed, although teacher-students relationship was friendly and supportive.

iii) Use of English in the classroom: Improvement in the variable like using English was also observed satisfactory. But code-switching (from English to Bangla) during pair-works and group-works was commonly seen which conforms to a study done by Kojima and Sato (2007) in Japan.

All but one teacher used Bangla when they perceived that students were failing to understand what they meant. That single teacher used English all the time in the classroom although it was obvious that many a time students could not follow her. However, during interview with her after the lesson she admitted that she used Bangla when students failed to follow her, but because of the presence of the researcher (an outsider) in the classroom, she used all English and no Bangla.

One commonly notable thing was that most teachers used a word or phrase in place of complete sentence and so did the students. And in most cases, the answers to the questions were one-worded, the reason of which may be incompetency to use complete sentence and weakness in English.

iv) Use of Audio-Visual Materials: Moving from most traditional classrooms where nothing but textbooks, blackboard and chalk were used as teaching-learning materials, (Yasmin, 2007; EIA Baseline Study 3, 2008) all 13 lessons used audio and/or visual materials of different types developed and provided by EIA. The contents of the audio were either songs *Good-morning song*, *Hello-song*, *Good-bye song* or lesson-related activities. The visual materials included posters, flash-cards, figurines or others. The table below shows the audio-visual (AV) materials used and duration of their use in all 13 lessons.

Table 2: AV materials used and Duration of their use

| No. of Lessons | Total Duration of All Lessons | AV materials used | Duration of Use (Minutes) |
|----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| 13 | 327 minutes | Textbook | 63 |
| | | Blackboard | 28 |
| | | Poster | 82 |
| | | Flash-cards | 15 |
| | | Figurines | 6 |
| | | iPod | 89 |
| | | Others | 44 |

The table shows that the duration of using iPod, poster and textbooks was pretty note-worthy. However, in one lesson students sitting at the back benches could hardly see the characters and activities in the poster. And in another lesson, though it was suggested in the Activity Guide that audio would be played, when the teacher attempted to play it, she found that it ran out of charge.

v) Classroom Management and Monitoring Students' Activities: The area where all but two teachers from two schools struggled most was classroom management. Other than two schools where in each class there were students ranging from 24 to 33, all the schools had classrooms with highly densed student population ranging from 53 to 130. Consequently, teachers of these schools had to spend more time in classroom management. Moreover, the students were kids only. As a result, teachers had to spend more time in presenting and organizing the class. Where total duration of all 13 lessons was 327 minutes, teachers' engagement in such area was 164 times which is obviously pretty high.

For the same reason i.e. unusually large class-size, most teachers were observed facing challenges in monitoring the activities of all the students and as such were unable to check writing tasks of majority of the students.

b) Findings from Teachers' Interviews

In the interviews, all 13 teachers shared several positive opinions along with the challenges they face now while trying to properly implement the relatively new techniques and practices they have to do.

All but one teacher informed that after getting involved in the EIA intervention, their ways and techniques of teaching English had changed. The ways they apply now were never done earlier in their teaching career.

As one teacher said,

“The way I conducted the class today, I never did it earlier.”

Teachers were seen to do different activities in the class. But all activities are not equally important. Again all teachers do not consider the same things as the most important things. During interviews, different things/activities were spoken out by the teachers as their important classroom practice. The idea which almost all teachers expressed relating to their most important things about their classroom practice is that they try to make sure the participation of their students in classroom activities. As another teacher said,

“The most important thing about my classroom practice I must say that ... I try to engage my students in the activities done in my class.”

Others informed that the strong thing about their classroom practice is that they use different activities like pair work, group work, role play and demonstration, responding in chorus (Harmer, 2007) etc during the class which makes the class more participatory and effective. In the words of a teacher,

"I try to make my lesson interactive by doing pair work, group work, role play etc."

They are in the opinion that their students feel motivated to try out such activities in the classrooms. Regarding students' responses to the changes made in the classroom, teachers reported that the attention of students got attracted by new practices and their responses were very positive and enthusiastic. A teacher quoted,

"I notice tremendous change among my students. Now they wait for the English class, especially for my class and for listening to the songs."

Regarding teacher-students and student-student interaction they reported that now their lessons are more 'vibrant' and 'lively'. They also reported that they tried to use more and more English in the class. Most of the teachers informed that before getting involved in EIA intervention, they frequently used Bangla, though they were taking English lessons, but now they use Bangla only when they find that their students cannot follow them.

To put this in the words of teachers,

"At first, I explain lessons in English as much as I can. If the students can understand, I continue. If they do not, I use gesture also. Even after this if the students cannot understand, only then I use Bangla... Now I think students can follow my instructions in English."

"Surely, my use of English has changed considerably ... I give instructions in English and try to communicate in English in the class which I would hardly do before"

However, six teachers who were taking English lessons in Grade 1 informed that as their students had just been admitted into the school, they could hardly understand if they used only English and no Bangla. So they had to use Bangla frequently so that the students could understand the lessons.

When the teachers were asked about the audio-visual materials provided by EIA, all appreciated these very much. They informed that after getting involved in EIA and having received training from cluster meetings, all of them had got accustomed to using poster, flash cards, iPod, and block rockers. They felt very 'happy' and 'lucky' getting these materials. All of them informed that these materials were very 'helpful' and 'effective' in facilitating the lessons. Seven of them reported that because of these materials, particularly iPod and speakers, students felt 'delighted' and 'enthusiastic'. A teacher expressed,

"I ... use poster, flashcard. I also use ipod, block rockers to play songs and conduct other classroom activities which I believe make my lesson more effective."

Most teachers also believe that a change in their perception about teaching has occurred after getting involved in EIA intervention. All of them now consider teaching a 'two way communication' and it is all about facilitation, participation and enjoyment. As they said,

"I have come to know that teaching is a two way communication."

"I have realised that teaching is basically facilitating learning and making learning enjoyable to the students."

They were also in the notion that all the lessons should be planned, of which previously they had no such strong perception.

"Because of taking part in EIA, now I try to take the lesson according to the lesson plan and step by step. Now I can take a well planned English class."

There is also a change in teachers' motivation. Their own words validate the truth. To quote two of them,

"Yes, my motivation has been changed to teach and learn English. After having learnt communicative techniques and methods of teaching English language, now teaching English seems

to me an easier task than ever before.”

“Previously I created pressure on the students to learn English but now I make them motivated ... I think about my students and try to develop my own English also.”

Problems in implementing EIA practices: Teachers, however, also reported problems in introducing EIA materials and practices in their context. The first and common problem mentioned by almost all teachers is heavy work-loads. Most of the teachers have to take 5-7 lessons each day. So they cannot prepare themselves properly. One female teacher said,

“I take 6 lessons everyday. Even some days when a teacher is on leave or absent, I get no off-period. So, I hardly get any time for preparation. At home, I have a family. As a mother, as wife I have many responsibilities. Consequently, I cannot manage time at home even.”

Others said that using iPod is time-consuming. In relation to this, a teacher puts,

“One of the problems I face in introducing EIA practices is that it is time-consuming to use iPod.”

Others reported difficulties in using iPod, block rocker and logitech.

“I face problem in playing iPod, in Logitech electricity could not be supplied.”

“iPod does not get connected with Logitech, even if it happens, in a while it gets disconnected and the like.”

Two teachers from a school told in rather a complaining tone that just after using iPod and speakers for a few days, these tools stopped working. So they were sent for repairing to EIA but it took 3-4 months to return to them. So they could hardly use these. Besides, two schools did not have provision of electricity. So the teachers had to struggle in charging these devices.

“One of the problems I face with introducing EIA practices is that our school has no electricity supply.”

In reply to the question whether playing iPod in the classroom disturbed other classes of the schools, nine of them told that it created problems for them.

From the interviews one very common reply came from the teachers of all but two (2) schools and that was teachers' struggle in organizing the class, which was also obvious during the period of classroom-observations by the researcher. Because of unusually large size of the classes, it appeared difficult for those teachers to carry on lessons and maintain interests of the students in the activities. Using new materials also posed difficulties in controlling the class, as one teacher said in the interview.

“The major problem I face with introducing EIA practices is that class management becomes difficult because all become curious while watching flash cards, figurines.”

One teacher even went to such extreme that she was not interested to be a part of the intervention. In her words,

“I do not want to continue. It is very tiresome and difficult job for me. And as you have observed I had 103 students in one class. I also informed the headteacher that I did not want to go for it.”

c) Findings from Students' FGD

For FGDs there were seven groups of students from seven schools. Each group consisted of six students of which three were girls and rests three were boys. During FGDs all the students stated that they liked to learn English. As reasons some common and similar responses emerged. Except a few, majority of the students said that they liked to learn English. As one student says,

“Yes, I like learning English. Because in the English class we listen to songs, play games, read poems and story.”

Every group informed that they did different activities like pair-work, group-work, language-related games, reading, writing, listening to iPod etc in their English class.

“Teacher told us to look at posters to see some words with picture and we did it. Then we were asked to work in pairs.”

“Teacher gave us some reading tasks and we did it. We read a story on 'Hare & Tortoise' from the book. He asked us to work in pairs.”

“We were to read the words and spellings of 1-20 (numbers). Teacher used poster and textbooks for this.”

These students do different kinds of activities in their English class. But all these do not appear to them enjoyable. They mentioned some very common activities they considered best for learning English. They said,

“The best kind of activity for learning English is songs”

“The best kinds of activities are group work, pair works and songs, because they make our lesson interesting.”

“The best kinds of activities for learning English are using games, cards, and songs.”

Many students said that they like to work with their friends i.e. classmates. As reason they informed that in such case they could share lesson with one another. If one did not know the answer, others could help him/her and it was a great fun for them. However, from two groups, three students said that they preferred working of their own to working with others. When asked the reasons for this, they could not give any explanation, just told that they prefer working individually.

Among the materials used by their teachers in the classrooms, they like iPod most. They like *Good-morning song, Hello-song* and *Good-bye song* very much. When they were asked if they liked lessons in the iPod, they replied in the affirmative that they also liked those. Another material they liked a lot was figurines.

However, regarding teachers' language use, the respondents gave mixed reply. According to them, teachers mostly spoke in English in the classroom but frequently used Bangla (L1) also. Responses of two students are given below.

“He spoke in both English and Bangla.”

“Mostly he spoke in English.”

Thus the study has found that in spite of several situational and contextual challenges faced by both teachers and students, the overall scenario is really encouraging and stimulating.

Scope of Further Research:

One very crucial factor which did not, however, come into play in case of these teachers' classroom practice is public examinations which greatly affect the implementation of CLT in Bangladesh, because, in these examinations the question format for English (as a subject) includes assessment of only two skills, namely reading and writing. Other two skills- speaking and listening are totally excluded. So, teachers, students and guardians all focus on developing reading and writing skills. Eventually, the classroom practice of the teachers also revolves round these two skills with the target of better preparing the students for the said examinations, as Quader (2001) argues that the main source of resistance against CLT is the lack of “a concordance between the examination, the syllabus, their notions about the process of learning, and the teaching method.” (p. 19).

But it is mentioned earlier that lessons observed in the study were either from Grade 1 and Grade 3 and the students of these grades do not have to sit for public examinations. They sit for only internal school examinations. So the teachers of these levels do not have to worry much about public examinations. As a result, it is easier for them to try to implement CLT principles in the classrooms. Consequently, the findings of the study are very positive and encouraging. But the crucial question is: does their classroom practice change as they move to teaching students of Grade 5 who have to

sit for public examination?

It would be more interesting and ever encouraging if similar findings could be observed from a future study on changes in classroom practice of English teachers teaching in Grade 5 also.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study, that there are considerable pedagogical changes in the classroom practices as it have been aimed by EIA (EIA, 2011), will certainly help ease the tension that prevails among the ELT community in Bangladesh. The reasons behind such changes as the teachers themselves informed are frequent school visits/monitoring by EIA staffs, planned Activity Guide, exciting teaching aids etc. More positive outcomes, however, will involve if the following recommendations can be maintained. For instances, i) class-size should be reduced to manageable figure so that teachers do not have to waste time in organizing and managing the students, ii) follow-up visits to schools should be continued, iii) changes in the assessment system should be made, iv) work-loads of the teachers should be reduced, v) the size of the posters for large classrooms should be bigger so that students at the back can see them clearly and vi) as the visual materials will not be provided over and over again, these should be made durable enough. Last but not the least, teachers should be motivated more so that they continue following the new practice and uphold the change initiative.

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