

Linguistic Transition at Tertiary Level: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study deals with linguistic transition (Bengali to English) at tertiary level at private universities in Bangladesh. It highlights the effects of this linguistic transition on the freshers. Data collected using questionnaires have been quantitatively analysed to conduct the study. The data show that linguistic transition has some effects, in most cases negative, on the beginners at the private universities in Bangladesh. The implications of this study are manifold; but in particular it will help make this transition smooth.

Keywords: Linguistic Transition, Tertiary Level, Private Universities, Effects, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, over the last twenty years, tertiary education has gone through a tremendous change. Earlier, public universities were the only places for higher education. Students, who failed to enter public universities, used to enroll at different colleges under National University or universities abroad. They did not have other alternatives. Since 1992, several private universities in Bangladesh started to enroll students at tertiary level. At present, 34 public and 51 private universities are providing higher education in Bangladesh. This has opened a new horizon for higher education in the country. However, unlike public universities, all the private universities in Bangladesh are using English as their medium of instruction. This has been an issue of controversy. The focus of this study is on something else: the effects of this linguistic transition on tertiary level students. Now, linguistic transition can be defined as a shift of medium of instruction from one language to another; in this case, a shift from Bengali to English at tertiary level in all the private universities of Bangladesh. This study would find out the effects of this linguistic transition on the freshers and help formulate strategy to make this transition smooth.

Some studies have been conducted on transition from higher secondary to tertiary level. Kantanis (2000) has worked on 'The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year of university'. This study particularly focuses on social transition at Australian universities. Kantanis points out that 'social networking', 'social skills', and 'communication competence' play important role in the transition. Similarly, Peel's research, 1997, assesses the extent to which general transition problems affect student performance and adjustment in a range of tertiary environments.

Pargetter *et al.* (1995) have worked on 'Transition from Secondary to Tertiary: A Performance Study'. According to them, the transition from school to university involves adjusting to different learning environments and assessment systems, different perspectives on disciplined-based knowledge, and different teaching practices. Further to that, McInnis and Jamesare (1996) have worked on 'First year on campus: A report on Australian first year students'. This research shows that first year students face many challenges: adjusting to different teaching styles, identifying standards and expectations, and managing workloads.

Macdonald *et al.* (2009) at the Faculty of Education at Monash consider that there are two distinct but complementary actions that can be taken to assist student transition to university: improvement in university subject design and teaching approaches, and greater attention to students' independent learning skills and general capacity to cope with the current university situation. On the same line, Kerri-Lee Krause (2006) thinks that much emphasis is usually placed on transition to university; relatively limited attention is given to the issue of transition through the first year.

Studies reviewed above depict different aspects of transition to tertiary education- social transition, expectations and experiences of the students, adjustment to new environment, teaching style and practices. While all these studies have highlighted transition in western and eastern universities, none of them deals with the transition of Bangladeshi students from higher secondary to tertiary level- let alone linguistic transition at private universities

in Bangladesh- which is unique in many respects compared to any western context. Freshers at tertiary level discover that at private universities medium of instruction is English though at secondary and higher secondary level it was Bengali. Again, in Bangladesh no study has been done on linguistic transition. This justifies the necessity of a separate study about the transition experiences of Bangladeshi students to tertiary level. This study has been undertaken on this plea. More specifically, it aims at finding out the general effects of linguistic transition on the freshers at private universities in Bangladesh.

2. Methodology

2.1 Approach

The researcher has combined quantitative and qualitative approach for the study.

2.2 Sample Size

The participants who answered the questionnaire were the first and second semester students of a private university in Bangladesh. The sample consisted of fifty students. Almost all the participants have come from Bengali Medium schools and colleges; they share the same culture. They were in the age group of 17-20 years. At the university, their medium of instruction was English.

2.3 Target Group

The target group of this study was tertiary level first and second semester students of private universities in Bangladesh.

2.4 Tool of Data Collection

A questionnaire was used to collect responses from the learners for the study. The researcher tried to make the questionnaire as simple as possible. The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions.

2.5 Limitations of the Study

- a. Some students could not understand the questionnaire properly; as a result some of the data may be misleading.
- b. For time constraint, it was not possible to work with a larger number of participants.

3. Presentation and Analysis of Data

3.1 General Effects of Linguistic Transition on the Freshers

In response to the question on the medium of instruction 98% (49 out of 50) students responded that Bengali was the medium of instruction at their schools and colleges. So, most of the students of this private university have come from Bengali medium background. Only one student is from different medium of instruction i.e. Arabic. It is really a linguistic transition (Bengali to English) at the tertiary level for these students.

In response to the question on initial feelings of the students (Fig. 1) 23 (46%) expressed their happiness. The rest of the students (24) were puzzled, sad and hesitant. This means many students (48%) are not happy with this linguistic transition and it affects their academic performance.

In response to the question on initial problem to speak in English (Qn. 3, Table-1), 96% of the students responded in the positive and they mentioned many aspects of the problem - not enough practice, wrong pronunciation, poor vocabulary, inability to make sentences and ask questions, being afraid of the language, grammatical problem, nervousness, poor English background, feeling shy, and thus hesitation. It means linguistic transition really creates problems for the learner as far as speaking is concerned. And regarding initial problem to write in English (Qn. 4, Table-1), 82% students mentioned that they faced different problems. They mentioned grammatical problem, poor vocabulary, sentence making difficulty, difficulty in understanding the topic, fear,

failure to organise ideas and when organised inability to express it properly, wrong spelling and not being creative. These say a lot about the poor standard of freshers' academic writing. When asked about expressing ideas in English (Qn. 5, Table-1), seventy four percent of the students responded that they could not express their ideas clearly in English. This always creates a communication gap between the teachers and the students. Possibly this is the main barrier raised between the two ends.

In response to the question on stock of vocabulary in English (Fig. 2), only 1 student said that it was rich. 22% had medium stock of vocabulary. Unfortunately 36 students (72%) said they had poor stock of vocabulary; this information is not at all encouraging for tertiary level education. Poor stock of vocabulary creates manifold problems for the learners- they cannot understand lecture, cannot read texts, can not speak, and can not write standard and acceptable sentences. All these make the learners more confused. While asked a question on organizing ideas in English (Qn. 7, Table-1), only 26% students responded in the positive whereas 74% responded in the negative. This means that the learners have poor sense of organization; whereas for academic writing this capability would play a vital role. In response to the question on their feelings (Qn. 8, Table-1), surprisingly 86% (43 students) informed that they were afraid/ shy/nervous while using English. This depicts the psychological condition of the students. This high affective filter obviously affects their performance in the initial stage at university. Regarding the listening problem (Qn. 9, Table-1), sixty two percent students responded in the negative. On the other hand, 38% students responded in the positive (Here the data may be misleading. Classroom observations suggest most of the students have problems with their listening). That means lecture delivered in English is sometimes an obstacle to student's comprehension.

A question on comprehension (ability to understand lectures, written texts, given materials) problem was also asked. In answering this, 90% respondents agreed that first and second semester students had comprehension problem. This highlights an important aspect of the transition experience. Comprehension problem creates gaps in student's knowledge. On being asked about their questioning skill (Qn. 11, Table-1), forty four respondents (88%) said that most of the students could not ask questions in the class in English. This means most of the learners do not possess questioning skill that could otherwise help resolve many mysteries. In response to the question on reading skill (Qn. 12, Table-1), sixty two percent students responded that they faced problems while reading texts written in English. This reading problem seriously affects the students' performance in the first and second semesters.

In answering a question on practice/exposure (Qn. 13, Table-1), most of the students (96%) responded that they needed more practice to be good at speaking/listening/writing/reading skill. This highlights the fact that the learners at the beginning never get adequate opportunity to practise these skills. This is a common problem everywhere.

Regarding interaction with teacher (Qn. 14, Table-1), 56% learners said that they avoided meeting or talking to their teachers on the campus deliberately as for doing so they had to speak in English. This means more than half of the students avoid meeting or talking to their teacher. Thus English as the language is sometimes a barrier to interaction between students and teachers.

When asked specifically a question on it (Qn. 15, Table-1), 60% responded that English as the medium of instruction makes their life difficult at the initial stage. This contributes to the high affective filter of the students and eventually it hampers learning. Fifty two percent respondents (Qn. 16, Table-1) said using English all the time in the class made them less confident. As a result, many students are not active in class and thus learning and teaching experience may be frustrating. To this question (Qn. 17, Table-1), 54% learners replied that linguistic transition made them frustrated. As a result some of them lose motivation at the initial stage. It affects learning as there is direct relationship between motivation and learning (Ellis, 1985).

3.2 Findings

The findings show that linguistic transition has some effects, in most cases negative, on the freshers' academic achievement at the private university. Freshers face manifold problems (Kantanis, 2000). Kantanis mentioned that lack of organisation, in terms of competing demands and time adversely affect students' academic progress. As most of them come from Bengali medium background, they are rather hesitant, puzzled, and sad at the initial stage; freshers feel shy/afraid/nervous to use English as well (Krashen, 1983). Their high affective filter affects their overall performance in the first two semesters – an observation also supported by Krashen. Krashen (1983) identified that anxious learners have a high affective filter, which prevents learning. Again, for lack of practice, they can not express their ideas clearly in English. Their stock of vocabulary is incredibly poor. Unfortunately, most of the freshers do not have any idea regarding organisation of discourse level writing as they were not

taught it earlier. Then, first and second semester students are very weak in writing, speaking, and reading as they did not have much exposure to these skills. They have comprehension problem as well. It has already been established by Ellis, Prabhu that “*Comprehending has been considered of primary importance in the acquisition of a language*” (Ellis 1991, Prabhu 1987). Moreover, sometimes learners can not understand lectures, written texts, and materials given by the teachers as they are in English. Beginners also lack questioning skill as most of the students and teachers are not interested in it and students are not, in most of the cases, linguistically equipped to ask question both inside and outside the class. Interestingly, some students even avoid meeting or talking to the teachers as they have to communicate in English (Krashen, 1983). Naturally, this creates a distance between the faculties and the learners hampering smooth transition. Again, some students believe that linguistic transition makes their life difficult in the first two semesters at university. Thus linguistic transition is creating a lot of pressure on the beginners. Even some of them become frustrated. Finally, students need more practice to be good at writing, reading, listening, and speaking. The scope for practising and developing these skills is not adequate at present.

Thus problems are too many but we have to get things done. How? As linguistic transition has some negative effects on the freshers, this has some implications for the learning and teaching practice at the tertiary level. Extensive interaction between and among the teachers and freshers is required so that the students get rid of shyness, fear, and nervousness. Frequent interaction with the faculty members and students will make them more confident (Krashen, 1983). Then, enrichment of student’s vocabulary in English should be a key focus. Next, students should have more practice for expressing their ideas clearly in writing and speaking. Organising discourse level writing should get priority in the class. Again, teachers have to teach reading, writing, and speaking following proper methodology (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Students need more exposure to these skills. Comprehension ability of the students has to be upgraded. Questioning skill of the students must be developed as well. More emphasis should be given on teaching grammar as students will not be able to communicate properly without grammar. Again, English must be taught properly at primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. Finally, linguistic transition at tertiary level has to be smooth. Here teachers can play an important role. Counseling will help the freshers a lot to integrate themselves with the new environment (Curran, 1976). A supportive and friendly attitude of the academic and administrative staff will make a big difference.

4. Conclusion

Linguistic transition is now a reality in the higher education scenario of Bangladesh, especially at private universities. Bengali, as the medium of instruction, has lost its place to English particularly at the tertiary level. However, after the independence the government of Bangladesh tried to use Bengali as the medium of instruction at all levels of education by declaring it as the official language in 1971..... “*there was an initial attempt not only to throw out Urdu but also to displace English and introduce Bengali at all the levels: in the bureaucracy, education, administration, and the judiciary*” (Banu, 2000). It did not work. After 40 years of independence, English is dominating the higher education domain in Bangladesh. As this study shows, this linguistic shift is creating some barriers for the beginners. Concerted efforts from students, faculty members and administrative staff for making this transition smooth will help remove many of these barriers.

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Serial No.	Question	Frequency of Answer		
		Yes	No	Others
3	Did you face any problem initially to speak in English?	48	02	00
4	Did you face any problem initially to write in English?	41	09	00
5	Can you express your ideas clearly in English?	12	37	01
7	Can you organise your ideas properly when you are speaking or writing in English?	13	37	00
8	Do you feel afraid/shy/nervous when you use English?	43	07	00
9	Do you face any problem when you listen to your teacher’s lecture delivered in English?	19	31	00
11	Do you think most of the students cannot ask questions in the class in English?	44	06	00
12	Do you face any problem when reading texts written in English?	31	19	00
13	Do you think you need more practice/exposure to be good at speaking/listening/writing/reading skill?	48	02	00
14	Do you avoid meeting or talking to your teacher as you have to speak in English?	28	22	00
15	Do you think English as the medium of instruction makes your student life difficult in the first two semesters at university?	30	20	00
16	You have to use English all the time in the class. Does it make you less confident?	26	23	01
17	Does this linguistic transition (Bengali to English) make you frustrated?	27	23	00

Table 1: Different questions with frequencies of answer. Some questions have been analysed qualitatively.

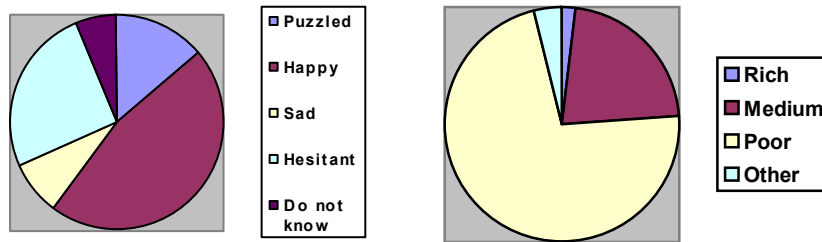


Fig. 1: Initial feelings of the students

Fig. 2: Stock of vocabulary

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