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English Language Teaching in Qawmi Girls' Madrasas in Bangladesh: Problems, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract: The research aims at identifying the problems, challenges, and prospects of English language teaching practice in girls' Madrasas. For the purpose of the investigation 5 Qawmi Madrasas for girls had been selected in Sylhet, Bangladesh. The Qawmi Madrasas have larger student base and more conservative curriculum than Alia Madrasas. Interviews of both teachers and students have been conducted with separate questionnaires to collect the necessary data that was analyzed using an inductive method. Based on the collected data, this paper presents a guideline for improving teaching practice in the girls' Madrasas that can benefit the teachers, students as well as the policy makers.

Keywords: Girls' Madrasa, English, Problems, Solutions, Teacher

Introduction

Any foreign language, including English, is difficult to learn if the learners are not exposed to the language in everyday life. The Qawmi Madrasa whose aim is to educate students in religious knowledge by using Arabic and Urdu as the medium of instruction, adopts a traditional system of teaching and learning based on text memorization and oral transition. They mostly overlook the necessity of learning English and thus creating a generation who are totally unaware of the perspective and practical aspects of learning English. This paper discusses the problems of teaching in Madrasas. The researcher also came up with some possible solutions while considering the challenges regarding implementing them. All the solutions mentioned here are possible to be realized only if the practitioners and policy makers are willing to do so.

Statement of the Problem

The main concern of Qawmi Madrasa is to teach students the Quran, the Hadith, and Tafsir. Although subjects like English, Bangla, and Science are included in the curriculum, they are considered as worldly knowledge and are often seen as a barrier to spiritual path. Moreover what I found while visiting girls' Madrasas is that the students are encouraged to adopt a submissive and meek behavior. Consequently these girls who are trained to learn passivity become inhibited to learn a foreign language.

Research Questions

- What are the main difficulties regarding teaching English in Qawmi girls' Madrasas?
- What are the causes of these difficulties?
- How to deal with these difficulties? What are some possible solutions?

Literature Review

Although there has been a rich body of work done that identifies and analyzes the problems of teaching English in Bangladeshi classrooms, there are very few works detailing these problems in the madrasas. When it comes to the Qawmi madrasas, no mentionable research exists that deals with the problems of teaching and learning in these institutions. A thorough search did not even reveal the presence of any research conducted with the girl students of these madrasas in focus.

This research therefore had to depend first on the theoretical works on the teaching of English as a second and foreign language, and then on the general body of research conducted on teaching English in Bangladeshi schools for a theoretical framework, methodology, directions and insights.

Teacher's English language proficiency level significantly impacts teaching (Nunan, 2003; Orafi and Borg, 2009). When the teacher is not proficient in English, it is impossible for her to conduct a class in English.

According to a study conducted in Bangladesh teachers have a tendency of slipping into Bangla after starting a sentence in English (Haider and Chowdhury, 2012). Teacher's training is one of the factors which cannot be ignored for the development of learners. According to Glynis (1999), the teachers need models of pronunciation, a scheme of work and teaching ideas.

Motivation is a very important factor for learning a foreign language. According to Corder (1967), given motivation, it is inevitable that a human being will learn a second language if he is exposed to the language data. Harmer (2001) distinguishes between two kinds of motivation- extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation is the result of outside factors. Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, comes from within the individual. A person who enjoys the learning process is intrinsically motivated. According to the majority of researcher's intrinsic motivation produces better result than extrinsic motivation.

For acquiring the necessary skills of language learning, there should be adequate classroom resources. Language competence grows incrementally through the interaction of reading, writing and talking (Discoll and Frost, 1999).

Kachru (1985) described English users/learners in terms of 3 circles. The inner circle indicates the countries where English is the first language, i.e. England, the USA, Canada, Australia. The outer circle refers to the countries where English is widely used and in many cases as the second language, i.e. India, Bangladesh. The last one is the expanding circle where English is learnt as a foreign language. For example, when people learn English in Japanese, it is considered as a foreign language. Looking into the

circles, we find Bangladesh into the outer circle. Even though English is not officially the second language in Bangladesh, it is a mandatory subject in schools from class 1 to 12.

When we consider English as a subject to learn, we consider covering the basic four skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are the receptive skills whereas speaking and writing are the productive skills.

Listening is a skill often ignored and feared by the language learners as well as the teachers. Marc Helgensen (2003) identifies five principles for teaching listening. First one is exposing students to different ways of processing information. This can be either bottom up or top down, even in some cases a combination of both. Whereas the bottom up processing focuses on grammar, vocabulary; the top down processing relies on learner's background knowledge on a given situation.

The second principle is exposing students to different types of listening. That is listening for different purposes. The third principle emphasizes on teaching of a variety of tasks. For example, after listening students should not only be given one type of task such as multiple-choice questions or true-false. In fact, they can be given a variety of task to avoid boredom as well as developing multiple skills. While the tasks should not demand too much production from the learners, the students should be exposed to a wider range of task. The fourth principle suggests acknowledging the issues of difficulty and authenticity while choosing the text. The difficulty level of the text determines to what extent listening will be successful. At the same time an authentic text makes listening more purposeful. The final principle suggests teaching students certain listening strategies such as predicting, inferring, monitoring, clarifying etc before assigning them with listening tasks.

Teaching of the speaking skill is often considered simple and in many places speaking practice includes memorizing phrases and dialogues. However, for Kathleen M. Bailey (2003), this is much more than memorization. She mentions five principles for teaching speaking. The first principle draws attention on being aware of the difference between second language and foreign language learning contexts. Same techniques and methods of teaching cannot be applied in both contexts. The second principle emphasizes on giving students practice that demand both fluency and accuracy. A teacher must give students feedback on accuracy but at the same time they should be aware of not hampering the fluency.

The third principle is about limiting the teacher talk and increasing student talk by incorporating group work/ pair works in the classroom activities. The fourth principle suggests the teacher should assign students with those speaking tasks that demands negotiation for meaning, only through negotiation students build better understanding of the language. Finally, the fifth principle focuses on designing classroom activities covering both transactional and interactional speaking.

While reading, a reader uses certain strategies to accomplish a purpose. According to Neil Anderson (2003), a teaching practitioner should keep certain principles in mind while designing reading

activities. The first principle suggests considering readers' background knowledge before setting up a task. If the readers are unfamiliar of the topic itself, they will not be able to complete the task appropriately. The second principle emphasizes on developing strong vocabulary base for the readers prior to reading. Unless the readers are familiar with the words, the reading activity will turn into a pointless commotion. Unfortunately, most of the reading classes focuses on testing rather than teaching. Therefore, the third principle advocates for teaching of the comprehension skills. The fourth principle recommends the teacher should work on students' reading rate while balancing between the fluency and accuracy.

The fifth principle implies that the readers should be taught a variety of reading strategies that can suit different reading tasks. The sixth principle suggests the teacher should encourage and guide the readers in transforming their strategies into skills so that reading becomes something natural to them. The seventh principle amplifies a successful reading program that must include both assessment and evaluation in the teaching. The final principle proposes the teacher himself should strive for continuous improvement by accepting his role as the facilitator.

Even though writing is that one skill which is most commonly taught and evaluated in a language classroom, most of the teachers are unaware of the underlying principles of teaching writing. Maggie Sokolik (2003) has come up with four principles for successfully teaching the writing skill. The first principle is about understanding the students' reasons for writing and then designing likewise tasks. The second principle suggests the teacher should create as many writing opportunities as possible for the students because writing improves with practice. The third principle implies that teacher should provide students with helpful and meaningful feedback of their writing. The students should be aware of their mistakes and how they can overcome these. The final principle says the students should be informed on how their writing will be evaluated to avoid any kind of confusion.

Methodology

To conduct this research, a qualitative exploratory approach was followed by the researcher. Interviews of 10 students and 10 teachers from 5 Qawmi Madrasas for girls using two separate questionnaires with 17 and 13 open ended questions were taken. An inductive method of data analysis has been used to obtain the results.

Findings

Based on the interviews, the researcher found the following problems concerning English teaching in girls' Madrasas:

Teachers' Qualification

None of the teachers whom I interviewed had a degree in English. Some of them were students of Zoology, Psychology and even Bangla. Moreover, they didn't receive any pre-service training. Although

all of them said that they have the opportunity to attend in- service training, they couldn't precisely explain how the training had helped them to improve their teaching practice.

Medium of Instruction and Communication

In the girls Madrasas that I visited, the teachers use Bangla to conduct the lesson. They justify this action by saying students are from rural areas and they won't understand the class if instructions are given in English. Moreover, students are not compelled to use English for communication. For them the idea of communication is merely repeating after the teacher.

The Tendency to Memorize

The teaching and learning in Madrasas is mostly dependent on memorization. Any inputs given in the class are memorized by the students. There is no real scope of showing creativity for the students.

No Real Exposure to Target Language

As the students of girls' Madrasas are detached from the outside world, there only sources of getting input in English are the teacher and textbook. However real acquisition of a second language only takes place when being exposed to it in more naturalistic ways or by using the language for serving some real life purpose. This could be done through reading English books, newspaper or magazine; by watching news or other programs in English; and by using the language for communicative purpose. Nonetheless in reality the students in Madrasas are devoid of all these facilities.

Failure to Develop the four Basic Skills

All the testing in Madrasas are more or less writing evaluation. All of the teachers who were interviewed claimed that their students are learning all four skills but when asked they could not clarify what activities are done to teach reading, listening and speaking or how these skills are tested.

Lack of Confidence

As the students in girls' Madrasas are growing up in a restricted environment they become very shy in nature. Their affective filter (an invisible psychological filter that can either facilitate or hinder language production in a second language) seems to be high and as a result they are not confident enough to use the language even to construct any sentence independently.

The Treatment of English as a Minor Subject

In the Madrasas English is considered a subsidiary subject. Therefore, the students' only intention is passing the exams rather than learning the language as there is no extrinsic motivation regarding developing English skill, students are quite indifferent toward the subject.

The Challenges

When I asked the teachers what changes they want to bring in English teaching at Madrasa, they had a variety of opinions. About the textbook it was suggested that there needs to be more grammar items and a diversity of content. Teachers also think if they had English board exam in class 8 and even after that it could motivate the students in learning English. However, to make these suggestions into reality, long term planning is needed as these ideas demand for a huge change in Madrasa board. Therefore, this paper comes up with some suggestions which do not need long term planning and are practically applicable only if the teachers and policy makers in Madrasas are willing.

Recommendations

Teacher's Training

From the interviews, it is evident that although there is scope for teacher's training in the Madrasa, they are more like a formality than action. These trainings focus on explaining the curriculum instead of exploring the teaching methods. Hence my suggestion would be arranging teachers' training that will focus on different teaching approaches as well as the techniques to teach different skills. For arranging the trainings Madrasas should not rely solely on the Madrasa board; they can contact private organizations like British Council, UKBET for conducting the teachers' training.

Using English as a Medium of Instruction

From the collected data it is apparent that the teachers themselves who are teaching in girls Madrasas are not proficient in speaking English, as a result they cannot use English for instruction or explanation. To solve this problem Madrasas should come up with the rule that any candidate applying for the post of English teacher must have a language proficiency certificate from any language center. Moreover, while recruiting the Madrasa authority should look for candidates who have at least a B.A degree in English.

Giving Students Enough Opportunity to Talk

The teacher should try her best to maximize student talk in the classroom. The teacher should know how to utilize group work or pair work for this purpose. Instead of mimicking the teacher students should be engaged in sharing opinion, debating and solving problem in groups. Pair work or group work help to boost up students' confidence level by allowing them to remain in a comfort zone. When students are engaged in the pair/group work, the teacher can monitor them from outside while correcting them occasionally.

Designing Classroom Activities to Develop All Four Skills

Teachers should use interesting activities in the classroom that will motivate the students to participate willingly. Some techniques that can be used to practice speaking are:

- a. Short Speech: Students will get random topics and they have to give a speech on that topic. When they are done, the teacher may give feedback on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.
- b. Role Play: Students will have to make conversation in pair playing role of a given character, i.e. doctor-patient, waiter-customer etc. They will get some time to take preparation before performing in front of the whole class.
- c. Advice Giving: Here one student will come up with a problem and another student will give suggestions as a counselor. This activity enables students to practice functional language like requesting, advising etc.
- d. Job Interview: One group of students will be job seekers and another group will be interviewers. Interviews will ask various questions and job seekers have to answer them using correct vocabulary, grammar while maintaining proper etiquettes.
- e. Story Telling: One student will start a story and everyone will add up to the story when their turn comes, eventually the last person will finish the story. Although this is a speaking activity it helps to develop students' creativity.
- f. Describing Picture: In this activity teacher will show a picture related to the lesson and students have to describe it. Teacher can also assign with the task of guessing the storyline behind the picture.
- g. Classroom Debate: Students will be divided into small groups. They will argue for and against on a topic related to society, economy etc.

To develop listening skills, following activities can be used in the class:

- a. Answering Questions: Teacher will play a recording. When it's finished teacher will ask students various questions related to the recording.
- b. Filling up a Chart/Graph: Students will get a graph/chart prior to listening. Based on the listening students will complete the given chart/graph.
- c. Arranging Picture: students will listen to a story and based on the story they will arrange pictures which were given before chronologically.
- d. Taking down the Message: Students will listen to a message. They have to note it down correctly.
- e. Deducting Information: Students will listen to different people talking about their everyday lives in a recording. Based on the described activities students have to guess their occupation.

Some suggestions for practicing reading skill are given below:

- a. Describing Ads: Students will read an advertisement from newspaper and elaborate them in small narratives.

- b. Matching Instructions: Students will go through a set of jumbled instructions i.e. a recipe. They have to put the instructions in correct order.
- c. Predicting the text: Students will be given some words from a text. By seeing the words they have to guess predict what type of text they are going to read. After that they will read the text and find out whether their assumptions are correct.
- d. Matching Headings: Students will get some titles or headings. They have to match them with the correct paragraphs of the text.
- e. Making Information Chart: Students will read a text about any place or country and present the main information in a chart.

Even though writing is the only skill that is practiced regularly on Madrasas, some suggestions are given below to make writing more effective.

- a. Writing Letter: The class will be divided into two groups. Both groups will write a letter to each other while playing certain character.
- b. Writing a Review: Students will read an extract from a literary piece. After the reading they will write a review on it.
- c. Making a Poster: Students will prepare a poster based on a given text.
- d. Fast Writing: This activity aims to increase students' confidence about writing. They will be given a topic and they have to write on the topic as quickly as possible. They cannot stop for thinking and will keep on writing whatever comes to their mind.
- e. Writing from a Model: Students will get a text and they have to write an essay based on the text using similar structure but modified ideas. For example, they may get an essay called 'my mother' but they have to write an essay titled 'my father'

Setting up a Library:

The girls studying in these Qawmi Madrasas don't have the chance to explore outside world. Therefore, if each Madrasa set up a library containing English books, magazines and newspapers, then the girls will get some exposure to English. According to Keith (2004) school libraries help teachers to educate students in a better way. When students have access to library they can be in charge of their own learning. Therefore, having a library is an integral part of developing student learning.

Adopting a Humanistic Approach in the Classroom:

Teachers should follow a humanistic approach in the classroom in order to make students feel good about them. A humanistic approach in teaching concentrates on the learner's self-development. In the case of Madrasas, the girls do not have any extrinsic motivation to learn language but if it is possible

to make them inwardly driven their learning rate can be higher as they will be able to reward themselves through achieving self-satisfaction.

Conclusion

Teaching a foreign language is not always an easy task. Especially in girls' Madrasas where English is a neglected subject, making the task even more challenging. This research was conducted with the purpose of identifying the challenges related to teaching and learning English in the Qawmi Madrasas for girls. I have suggested some solutions for the improvement of teaching practice which are easy enough to follow only if the concerned authorities are keen. I would like to conclude by saying that learning a language can never be a hindrance towards religious ways. Madrasa education is one of the main streams of our education system. Still in rural areas people prefer Madrasas over bangle medium schools. According to a report from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) who conducted a first of its kind study in 2014, there were approximately 340,000 female students enrolled in over 1200 female Qawmi Madrasas across the country. It is imperative that these students are given proper opportunity to learn and practice the English language to prepare them to compete with fellow students from the mainstream educational system for jobs and other opportunities.

The recommendations made in this paper will not be of much help unless the concerned authorities realize the importance of learning English. As it is an issue that concerns the advancement of education as a whole, the Government, Madrasa education board, civil society and other organizations working in the educational sector should come forward to improve the teaching of English in the Qawmi Madrasas. We can't expect to get an educated generation by putting aside the Madrasa students. Therefore, the welfare of Madrasas should be the concerned of the policy makers.

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Appendix 1***English Language Teaching in Girls' Madrasas: Problems, Challenges and Prospects***

Name of the participant:

Name of the institution:

Date:

Interview questions for teachers

1. Can you please tell me about your educational background?
2. Did you receive any training in teaching/ pedagogy?
3. Is there any scope for you to update your teaching through training?
4. What is the duration of the classes that you take?
5. What materials do you use in the class?
6. Do you use only English in teaching your class or do you also use Bangla?
7. Do you think your students enjoy learning English?
8. What do you find most challenging regarding teaching English?
9. How do you test students' level of learning?
10. Do you encourage students to memorize answers, or write creatively?
11. Is there any scope of creative writing for students?
12. Does the administration emphasize on following a particular teaching pattern?
13. What do you do to ensure that students are using English for communication?
14. Do you make students work in pairs or group?
15. Do you teach your students to acquire all the four skills of language? If not, why?
16. Do you think the students like the curriculum? What improvements in the curriculum do you suggest?
17. What are your suggestions for improving teaching English in Madrasas?

Appendix 2***English Language Teaching in Girls' Madrasas: Problems, Challenges and Prospects***

Name of the participant:

Name of the institution:

Date:

Interview questions for students

1. Do you enjoy English classes? If not, why?
2. What materials are used in the class?
3. Do you find them difficult? If so, why?
4. Do you think these can be improved?
5. What is the medium of instruction in class?
6. What do you find difficult about learning English?
7. How do you prepare yourself for the exam?
8. Do you get help from teacher/s outside the classroom?
9. Do you read anything in English other than the text books?
10. Do you get pair work or group work in classroom?
11. Does your teacher test your skills in writing, speaking, listening and reading?
12. In which skill/skills do you think you and your friends have the biggest lacking?
13. Do you think learning English is important for you?