

Methods and Practices of English Language Teaching in Bangla and English Medium Schools

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Abstract

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) revised the English curriculum for secondary schools (grades 6 to 10) in the 1990s in an attempt to address the continuing deterioration of the standard of English language teaching. A top-down revision process called for a switch from the traditional grammar-translation method to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Since then CLT became the prescribed approach to teaching of English at the mainstream Bangla medium schools of Bangladesh. On the other hand, the privately run English medium schools are mainly concerned with preparing the students to take the tests set by international testing authorities like Edexcel. This study examines the methods and practices of English language teaching in the mainstream Bangla medium schools of Bangladesh and compares them with the current methods and practices used in English medium schools. The study is based on the responses of 400 students and 32 teachers from both Bangla and English medium schools and 22 classrooms observations in the year 2008 and 2009 located in Dhaka city. Among some of the common practices found at both Bangla and English schools are: translations from English to Bangla, reading aloud, setting individual tasks for students and memorization of grammatical rules etc. It is also revealed that some CLT techniques e.g. using L1 for giving instructions, silent reading, explaining the new vocabulary in English are practiced in English medium schools. Other CLT techniques namely, warming up activities, techniques to present new vocabulary, pair and group works, and peer correction are hardly practiced in both types of school.

1. Introduction

English is a dominant factor in the development of a country as it affects the choices and opportunities in education, technology and global trade and business all over the world. A workforce that is creative, adaptive and proficient in English is essential for fostering a nation's socio-economic development. However, achieving the command and mastery of English is a challenging task in a developing country like Bangladesh. After four decades of independence, Bangladesh is yet to formulate a clear policy for the status, use and teaching

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of English in academic and other spheres. Consequently, the country is struggling to produce a young workforce with a high level of proficiency in English. This situation calls for a rethinking about the currently applied methods of teaching English.

Background

At the dawn of the new millennium, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) revised the English curriculum and introduced the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method for teaching English at the secondary level. CLT was introduced in Bangladesh with a focus on developing the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in a communicative context. However, the NCTB syllabus document of 1995 does not prescribe a particular CLT approach, rather, it suggests some features of CLT to be applied to initiate the practice of communicative language teaching in Bangladeshi classrooms. The syllabi mainly put emphasis on the need for developing the four skills by maximizing learners' interactive use of the target language within the classroom in meaningful contexts.

The concept of CLT

There have been various interpretations and understanding of the term CLT since it was announced as the nationally prescribed teaching approach of English. Many of the Bangla medium teachers were not familiar with the key concepts of CLT that is based on the Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence. This theory emphasizes learners' ability to use language in specific contexts and in terms of social demands of performance (McNamara, 2000:116). Canale and Swain's (1980) analysis of communicative competence found four dimensions of communicative competence. They are: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2002:160).

The basic characteristics of CLT include using authentic texts in the learning situation providing opportunities for learners to focus, not only on the language but also on the learning process itself. They also include taking the learner's own personal experiences as an important element in classroom learning - linking classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom (Nunan:1991). Richards & Rodgers (2002) points out that CLT focuses on classroom activities based on communicative methodology, such as group work, task-work, and filling information gap.. Freeman (1986) emphasizes grammar and vocabulary that the students learn from the functions, situational context, and the roles of the interlocutors in CLT. Alderson (2000) mentioned the importance of the process of reading that is silent, intent and private.

Current scenario

In the light of the above mentioned features of CLT, one can strive to formulate a set of strategies to implement CLT approach in EFL classroom. Accordingly, a group of Bangladeshi experts along with some expatriate consultants reviewed the former English for Today (EfT) textbook for grade 6 to 10 and wrote textbooks following communicative

approach in line with the recommendation of National Curriculum and Syllabus Committee (Hoque, Mummie, Shrubsall, 2010). They prepared teachers' guide following the textbooks also. The Bangla medium schools followed the revised curriculum and textbooks introduced by the NCTB. It was expected that students would achieve mastery of English, and at the same time be fully appreciative and devoted to the use of Bangla, the mother tongue. However it is generally agreed that after more than a decade of implementation of CLT, students of Bangla medium schools are still struggling to achieve desired level of proficiency in English (Afroze, Kabir & Rahman, 2008; Rahman, 2011). On the other hand, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of English medium schools, which do not operate under the control of local education administration. These English medium schools follow foreign curricula and textbooks. It is the general impression that the students of the English medium schools have a higher degree of proficiency in English (Hasan, 2004; Rashid, 2010). Therefore, the question that arises is what differences in methods and practices of English language instructions in the two types of schools result in the presumed difference in language proficiency outcome. This study intends to answer the question by looking at the similarities and differences in English language teaching techniques between Bangla and English medium schools.

Prescribed guidelines for teachers

As a set of prescriptions to the teachers of Bangladesh, Foster (1997) specified some classroom-teaching practices in Teacher's Guide for class 6. It was mentioned that teachers should avoid translation and students should develop their English skills in English. It further said that students should be trained to work in pairs and groups for some of the oral and writing activities in the textbooks. To present the new language, warm-up activities were suggested at the beginning of the lesson. Foster (1997) also mentioned how to present new vocabulary items such as, using textbook pictures, other visual aids, miming, etc. Silent reading was emphasized to develop reading skills. It was also mentioned that memorising grammatical rules were not of much help; a clear understanding of the concept was more important. To present new structures, teacher's task was to make sure that students understood the concepts as well as the actual words. Foster (1997) emphasized lesson planning because it would include management of time, technique of presenting the whole lesson, vocabulary, new structures, thinking of extra examples and predicting any difficulties which would arise in the class.. There was no such document containing guidelines for English language teaching for the English medium schools in Bangladesh. The text books were published by foreign publishers which were prescribed by the school authority to teach the language.

2. Method of study

The research was conducted following a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The data collection techniques involve use survey analysis and classroom observation.

Sampling

The study used the students and teachers of Bangla and English medium schools as respondents for comparing English language teaching methods and practices. The sampling for the study was done purposively from four Bangla medium and four English medium schools. A total of 400 respondent students took part in the survey of which 280 were from Bangla medium schools and 120 from English medium schools. The total number of respondent-teachers was 32, of which 20 teachers were selected from Bangla medium schools and 12 teachers from English medium schools. Two types of questionnaires were prepared for the teachers and the students. As the class-size of English medium schools were smaller than that of Bangla medium schools, the number of respondents from the two types of school were not the same. Considering time and other constraints, the sample was narrowed down to the students of class six only. Eight lessons taught at English medium schools and sixteen lessons taught at Bangla medium schools were selected for observation. Considering the time and communication constraints for the self motivated researchers, the schools were purposively selected in Dhaka city. The duration of the research period was 2008 to 2009.

Data collection tools

There were seven structured questions in the questionnaire for the Bangla medium students and the same questions were included in English for English medium students. However, the questionnaire for the Bangla medium participants was in Bangla. The questionnaire for the teachers of both medium of schools contained seven semi-structured questions. The questionnaires were designed to collect information on the classroom-based practices of CLT by the students and teachers. An observation checklist was prepared to record the findings of classroom observation. The checklist was designed to focus on important aspects of classroom teaching.

3. Findings

On the basis of the data gathered from questionnaires and class observation, some differences and similarities in certain areas of teaching-learning practices between Bangla and English medium schools have been identified. The differences are presented below.

3.1 Differences

3.1.1 Medium of instruction

Regarding the medium of instruction in the English language classes, 17.86% students of Bangla medium schools state that their medium of instruction in the English lessons is only English while 82.14% mention it to be a mixture of Bangla and English. In their responses, 33.33% Bangla medium teachers report that they use English always and 66.67% of them mention they use both English and Bangla as medium of instruction. On the other hand, 100% of students and teachers of English medium schools state English as the only medium of instruction used in their English classes. The class observation finds the use of both

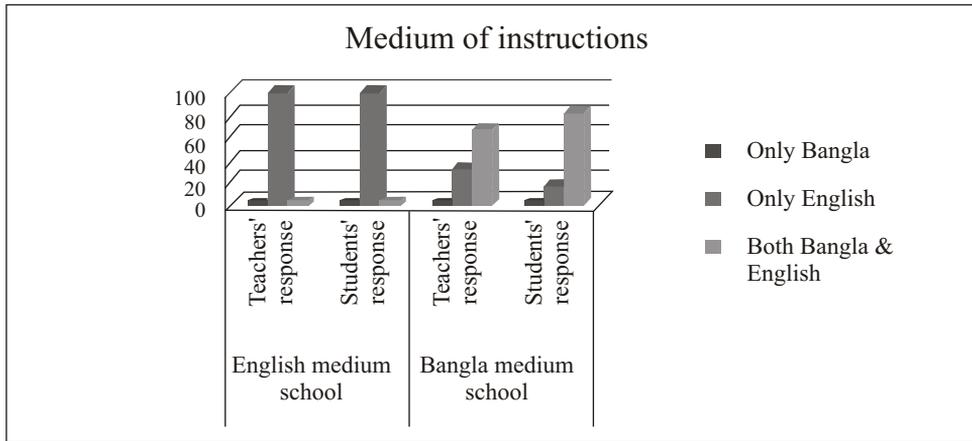


Figure 1: Medium of instruction used in Bangla and English medium schools

Bangla and English for giving instructions in Bangla medium schools while all the instruction in English medium schools are given in English. (Figure 1)

3.1.2 Use of Translations from English to Bangla

Regarding the use of translation in the classes, 62.86% students and 53% teachers of Bangla medium students mention that the English texts are translated in Bangla while 100% students and teachers report that no translation is used in their English classes. It is also evident from the classroom observation that the Bangla medium schoolteachers often translate the text into Bangla to make the students understand. No teacher of English medium school is found to have used translation into Bangla in their lessons.

3.1.3 Techniques of reading

While responding on the reading techniques used in their English classes, 51.43% of Bangla medium students mention reading aloud, 20% mention silent reading is the practice, and 28.57% mention use of both reading aloud and silent reading. In comparison, 100% of English medium school students report silent reading as the sole reading technique practiced in the classes.

Again, 40% of Bangla medium teachers admit that they ask students to read the text aloud while 20% of them report to engage their students in reading silently and another 40% refer to both silent reading and reading aloud as the common technique used by them for teaching reading. As stated by the English medium schools students, 100% of the teachers of English medium schools assert that they always ask their students to read the texts silently. While observing the classes in Bangla medium schools, most teachers were found to instruct the students to read aloud in the classes. In English medium schools, the teachers asked the students to read the text silently in the classes. (Figure 2)

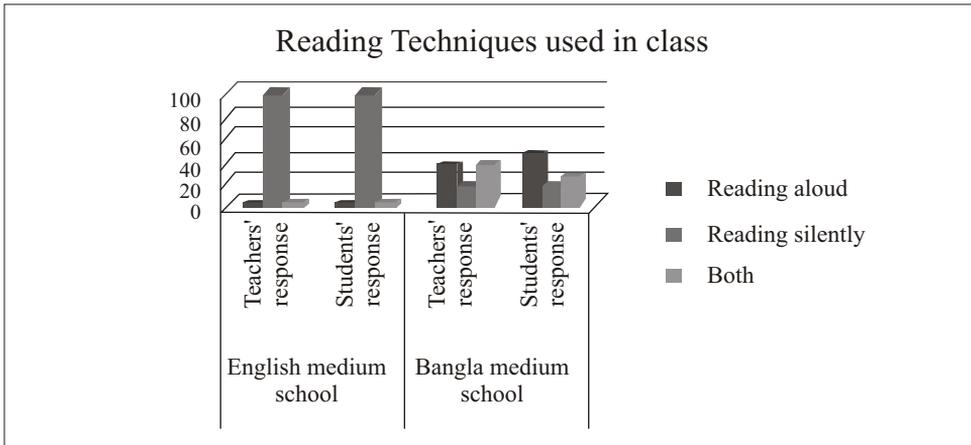


Figure 2: Techniques of teaching reading in Bangla and English medium schools

3.1.4 Techniques of grammar rules

In their responses to the question how they learn use of grammar rules, 56.14% of Bangla medium school students mention they start learning grammar by memorizing the rules; 42.87% report that they do it by reading the content of the English textbooks.. Among the English medium students, 3.33% students response that they try to understand the concept of the structures and use of rules; but a large majority of 96.67% mention practicing the set grammatical items from the content of the text. On the other hand the Bangla medium

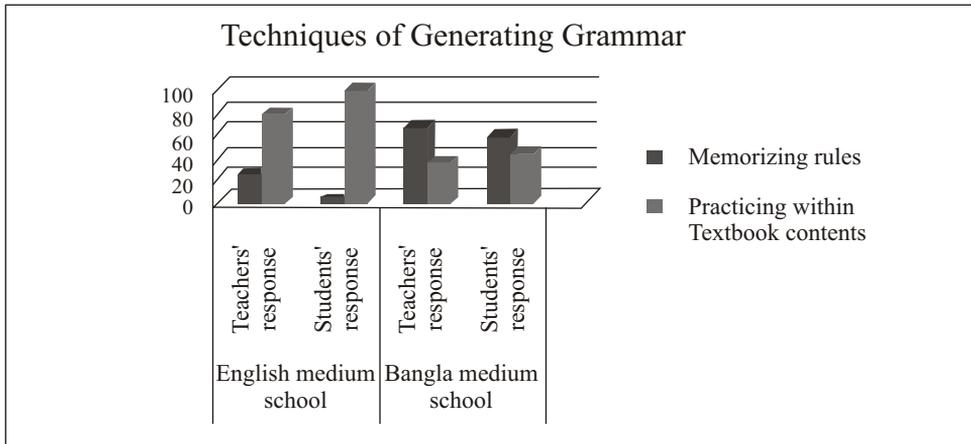


Figure 3: Techniques of generating grammar

teachers report that 65% of them help students learn grammar by asking students to memorize grammatical rules; 35% of them say they ask students to study the grammar- items in the English textbook. However, the English medium school teachers opine that 24.99% of them taught grammar by explaining the concept of the structure and use of the rules and another 74.97% asked students to practise the grammar items from the contents of the text books. From the classroom observation in Bangla medium schools, it was evident that grammar items were required to be memorized. In English medium schools, it was found that students were encouraged to practice the use of grammatical or structural items within the set contents of the textbooks.

3.1.5 Difficulties in four skills

While asking students to comment on the difficulty they face with the four skills of English language-listening, speaking, reading and writing, 45% of the Bangla medium students

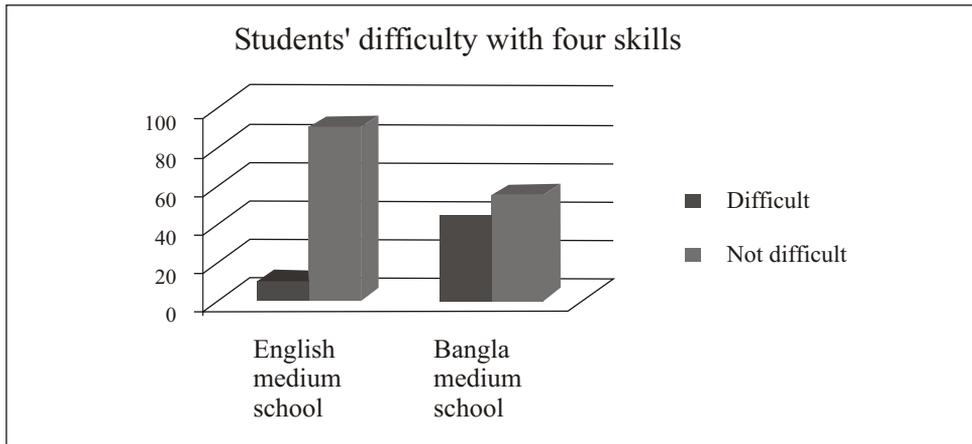


Figure 4: Students’ difficulty with four skills

respond that find the four skills to be difficult while the rest 55% state these are not difficult to them. On the contrary, only 10% of students of English medium schools say that the four skills are difficult to them and 90% have no difficulty with the four skills of English. It is evident that the students of English medium schools do not find English as a difficult subject as it is to their Bangla medium counterparts.

3.1.6 Teachers’ qualifications and training:

It is revealed from the respons made by teachers that only 20% of teachers of Bangla medium schools have a graduation degree in English while the remaining 80% do not have graduation level qualification in English. In contrast, 100% of the English teachers of English medium schools have the bachelor degree in English. This finding clearly indicates that the teachers

of Bangla medium schools are lagging behind their English medium colleagues in terms of academic qualification in English language.

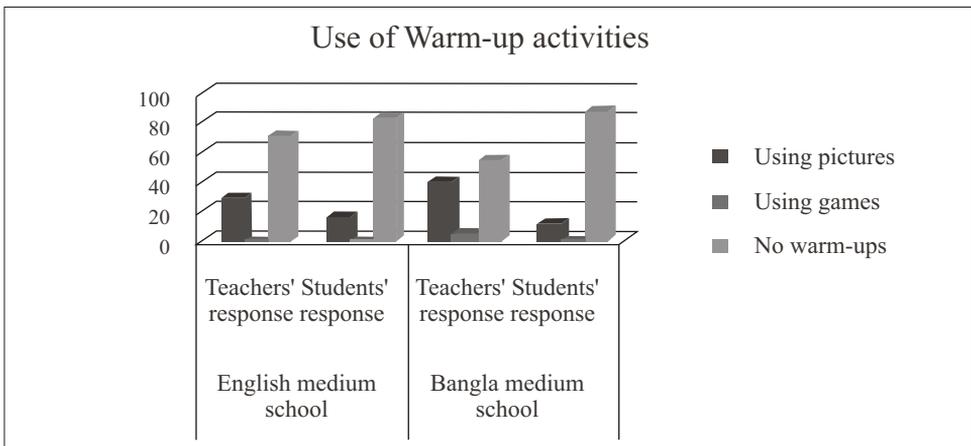
Regarding the number of teachers having professional development training, the Bangla medium schools have a clear advantage over the English medium ones, at least in terms of the quantum of training. It is reported that 80% of Bangla medium teachers who teach English have been trained on CLT and the remaining 20% have some other professional training. Among the English medium school teachers, only 16.67% have training in CLT approach and the remaining 83.33% teachers have no training at all.

3.2 Similarities

Despite the above-mentioned differences there are some common features found in the teaching-learning practices of Bangla and English medium schools. The areas of similarities are described below.

3.2.1 Warm up activities

According to 87.86% of the students of Bangla medium schools, no warm-up activities, such as, using pictures or games etc. are used while presenting new language to them. Only 12.14% students mention the use of pictures as warm up activities. A similar situation prevails in English medium schools as 83.33% of the students say that new lessons are not presented through pictures or games. A modest 16.67% mention warming-up in their classes. Again, as reported by teachers themselves, 55% and 71% of teachers from Bangla and English medium schools do not use any warm up while 40% of Bangla medium teachers and 29% of English medium teachers introduce new language lessons through pictures. Only 5% teachers of Bangla medium schools report using games as warmers. Warm up activities were rarely in evidence during classroom observations.



Figurer 5: Use of warm up activities for presenting new language

3.2.2 Presenting vocabulary

In their responses to how new vocabulary is presented in the classes 6% students from Bangla medium schools and 13% from English medium mention “inferencing” technique, which they use for guessing meaning of words in a text. 9% mention using textbook pictures and other visual aids. However, according to 57% of students they learn vocabulary through teachers’ explanation in Bangla. Only 17 % students of Bangla medium school mention teachers’ use of English for explaining the unknown words compared to 46% students of English medium. However, 30% English medium students learn vocabulary by searching the words in English-to-English dictionaries.

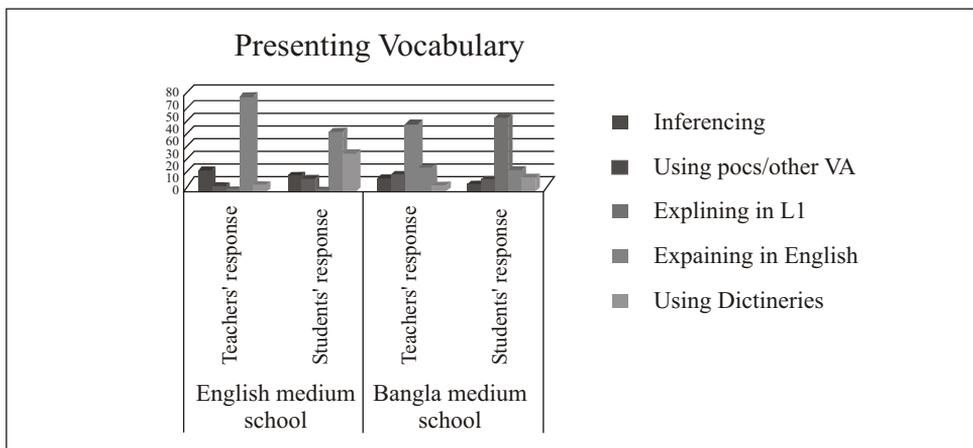


Figure 6: Techniques for presenting vocabulary

As per the responses of Bangla medium school teachers, 11% present vocabulary by inferring meaning from the text, 13% use textbook pictures and use other visual aids, 52% teachers explain the words in Bangla, 19% teachers explain the words in English and 5% present them by using dictionaries. Again, among the English medium teachers, 17% use inferring meaning, 4% use pictures and other visual aids, 73% explain the unknown words in English and 6% present vocabulary by using dictionaries. While observing the classes, it was seen that the techniques almost exclusively used of presenting new vocabulary was explaining the meaning in Bangla and in English in Bangla and English medium schools respectively.

3.2.3 Students’ interaction pattern

Regarding the interaction pattern that the students have to work in during the lesson, 20% of Bangla medium students mention pair work or group work as ways of classroom based language practice, but 80% of students mention individual work only.

According to the students of English medium schools, 10% students are engaged in pair work, 13.33% in group work and 76.66% in individual work. As for the teachers, 30% and 10% of Bangla medium teachers report using pair work and group work respectively with their students while 60% of them admit they use individual work only. The teachers of English medium give almost the same reply. According to their responses 28% of the teachers used pair work, 8.33% group work and 63.67% used individual work. However,

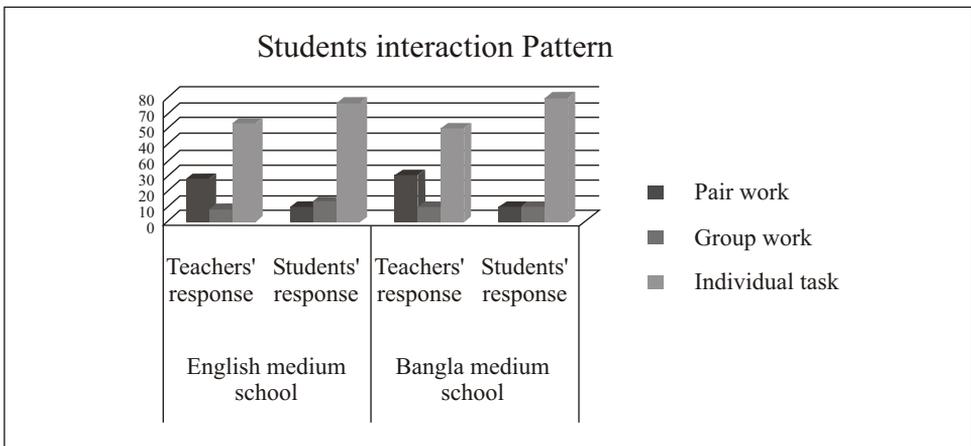


Figure 7: Students' interaction patterns

during classroom observation, it was found that the pair work and group work were not practiced in most of the classes in both types of school. No pair work, group work and peer correction activities were found in the observed the classes.

3.2.4 Preferred method of teaching

Among the Bangla medium teachers, 80% mention Communicative Language Teaching as the preferred method and 10% state that they follow the content of the prescribed textbooks. On the other hand, 83.33% of English medium teachers opine that they follow the contents of the textbooks while only 16.67% mention CLT. However, while observing the classes in Bangla medium schools, most of the teachers were found conducting the classes in traditional ways. The lessons taught by the English medium schoolteachers were mainly reliant on following the textbooks rather than following a certain method of teaching. Overall, the findings reveal the fact that despite their presumed knowledge of CLT the Bangla medium teachers follow traditional ways of English language teaching in the classes. The teachers of English medium schools do not seem to follow a specific approach or method, but improvise classroom activities following closely the contents of selected textbooks.

3.2.5 Preparation of lesson plans

Regarding preparing and using lesson plans 20% teachers in Bangla medium schools state that they prepare lesson plans everyday and 80% mention preparing lesson plan once a week. In the English medium schools, 100% of the teachers tell that they prepare lesson plans everyday. On the contrary, while observing classes, there are a very little evidence of preparation and use of lesson plans either by Bangla or English medium schoolteachers.

4. Discussion

The findings of the study reveal some differences and similarities between English language teaching practices at Bangla and English medium schools. It also identifies some strengths and limitations of the English language teaching methods and techniques followed by the concerned teachers in both types of schools. It is revealed from the study that the Bangla medium teachers are not as qualified as their English medium counterparts in terms of academic qualifications are. However, most of the Bangla medium teachers have professional training on CLT or other teaching methods, though the quality and value of this training was not examined in this study. It is generally agreed that a combination of good academic background and professional training is needed to produce better teachers for schools, irrespective of the medium of instruction. . Therefore, it can be argued that it is necessary for the English medium teachers to have some professional training while having at least a graduation degree in English is certainly necessary for the Bangla medium teachers who have better training opportunities.

It is revealed from the study that the English medium teachers are exercising better teaching practices in the classroom in terms of use of target language as medium of instruction, encouraging silent reading activities, avoiding translations and presenting grammar-structures in meaningful contexts. The findings on teachers' academic qualification have significant implication in this regard. In fact, teachers' own proficiency level in English is an important factor to determine his/her teaching practices in the classroom. In this respect, the English medium schools are rather privileged in having their teachers as graduates of English. On the other hand, despite the professional training the Bangla medium teachers have on teaching methodology, they are less able to exercise many of the training ideas due to their limited proficiency in English. For example, almost all the Bangla medium teachers are aware of the fact that they should give instructions in English but the study reveals that they do not do so. This does not indicate their unawareness of the importance of using the target language in the classes; this rather implies their inability to use English fluently and accurately in lessons.

As per the study, both English and Bangla medium teachers have the tendency of either avoiding or neglecting some recommended teaching practices, such as making lesson plans, using warm ups, teaching vocabulary in contexts, using pair/group work etc. As these deficiencies are common in both types of school, it is difficult to identify the factors

responsible for such detrimental practices. As noted earlier, a good command of English combined with a sound understanding of the methodological aspects of CLT may help the concerned teachers improve the scenario in both types of schools. Nevertheless, the question of teachers' motivation is still highly pertinent which remains unanswered in this study.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore the similarities and differences of existing method in Bangla medium and English medium schools in Bangladesh. The key findings indicate that though most teachers of Bangla medium schools had professional training on CLT, they do not practise the most common techniques of CLT in the classroom and their students find it difficult to develop the four skills of English. On the other hand, though the teachers of English medium schools did not have training on CLT or any other English language teaching method, their instructions are given in English and they practice some features of CLT in the classes. However, the teaching practices of English at both Bangla and English medium schools have many limitations which need to be addressed by the concerned teachers. Therefore, a good command of English combined with a sound understanding of the methodological aspects of CLT may help the concerned teachers improve the scenario in both types of schools.

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