

THE PRESCRIBED BOOK OF *ENGLISH FOR TODAY* VIS-À-VIS LEARNERS' NEEDS AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH

MD. ANISUR RAHMAN ANIS, MD. ZAKIR HOSSAIN TALUKDER¹,
MD. KAMRUL HASAN², ASEK AMIN MIRAJ³, and
S M SHAHAJAHAN SHIRAZ TALUKDER⁴

Faculty of Engineering, Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, Santosh,
Tangail. ¹School of Social Science, Humanities and Language, Bangladesh Open
University, Gazipur; ²Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, Uttara, Dhaka,
³Brac Institute of Language, Brac University, Dhaka; ⁴Department of English,
Darul Ihsan University, Tangail Campus, Tangail.

Abstract

English is, no doubt, a necessary language for survival in the modern era. So English is introduced as an academic subject from class one to graduation in Bangladesh. Now students learn Bengali and English simultaneously. But they hardly have any scope to use English outside the classroom situation because English is a foreign language to be used and is not used frequently in social situations. However, English, by now, has acquired a central position in Bangladesh education system. There are three education systems, for instance, at secondary level in Bangladesh. These three systems are: General education sub-system (which include government, semi-government, non-government and English medium schools), Madrasha education sub-system and Vocational education sub-system. English is taught as a compulsory subject in each of these systems and sub-systems. Bengali represents the mainstreams and is the medium of education in the public schools and colleges. English represents the mainstream and is the medium of education in the English medium schools and colleges. In Madrasas, though Bengali is the medium of instruction, Arabic has a prestigious place there. In Vocational education, Bengali plays a dominant role in the medium of instruction (started in 1995). While the middle class people opt for Bengali, the poor and the rich opt Arabic and English respectively. In the context of Bangladesh, *English for Today* has been included as a prescribed text book which is produced by Bangladesh National Curriculum and Text Book Board (NCBT) and the publishers approved it. *English for Today* is used in the secondary and higher secondary levels of Bangladesh, which follows the curricula of National Curriculum and Text Book Board and to review whether or not this *English for Today* meet the educational needs as put forward by the curricula from the practical situation of Bangladesh. This study will also provide insight into why there is a mismatch between what is in our curricula and how the text books and other materials are taught in the secondary level of Bangladesh.

Key Words: Integrated, Incorporate, Assess, Sequence, Investigate, Prioritization, Impression, Decipher.

Background

The general education sub-system includes government and semi-government schools. The series of *English for Today* published by Bangladesh National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), is compulsory for classes from six to twelve of the general education sub-system. At the same time schools enjoy some freedom in choosing

additional or supplementary books appropriate for their students. Besides these two texts, for unseen comprehension (for both teaching and testing), students follow any book published by different publishers and approved by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). These publishers also publish notebooks and guidebooks. However, all these books aim at helping students to do better in the examinations rather than to improve their proficiency in the English language. Moreover, a supplementary grammar book is also used for all the classes up to twelve.

The books used in classes six to eight are as follows:

1. *English for Today* published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) as the text book.
2. Supplementary Rapid Readers (only a few schools especially urban ones include them in the syllabus)
3. A supplementary grammar book.

The books used in classes nine to twelve are as follows:

1. *English for Today* published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) as the text book.
2. A supplementary grammar book.

In addition to the above books, some schools include a word meaning book or Dictionary in their syllabi. The English medium schools generally do not follow the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB); and they follow British and American curricula. Therefore, their textbook is completely different from the general school textbooks. The selection of textbooks varies from school to school.

The Description of Textbooks

The description of a textbook enables one to select a well-motivated material. The information about textbooks can be obtained from two sources: the textbook itself and its users. The text book description will be used for the collection and description of data on the form and content of the textbook itself, while textbook evaluation will be used for the collection and description of data on its effects on the users. Ideally the description should be objective. *English for Today* a series of compulsory texts for classes six to ten is prescribed in government and semi-government schools under the general education sub-system. As stated in their preface, these books follow the communicative approach to the teaching and learning of English in the Bangladeshi context.

English for Today has been collectively evaluated and rewritten by foreign expatriate consultants and local experts. Individual lessons were trialed in government, semi-government and non-government, urban and rural secondary schools in different parts of the country. This was followed by a syllabus and textbook revision workshop held for secondary school teachers and English language specialists at the National Curriculum and Textbook Board in Dhaka after which further revisions were made. So far as textbook description is concerned, it can be applied to a single item as well as to the whole set of material. The information available in the textbook enables teachers to arrive at a well-motivated choice. It will discuss information made available by authors and publishers of textbooks, textbook reviews, and checklist of points relevant to description and evaluation (Van els *et al.* 1987). Van els *et al.* (1987) observed that the reviews could

be called to be the most general and widely used type of description. The most important merit of reviews is that they provide prompt information, so that, the editors of journals can publish quickly enough. Reviews are, however, severely limited in comparison to the textbook descriptions. They often contain only summary and superficial information and may be very subjective. Bangladesh, like any other newly independent nation, needs a dynamic education system to meet the needs of life and time. For this reason, after the liberation of Bangladesh, new textbooks were developed on the basis of the recommendations of the National Curriculum and Syllabus Committee. *English for Today*, for instance, was developed by English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), jointly funded by the Government of Bangladesh and Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom (UK).

A team of three writers trained in the UK through English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) wrote the book *English for Today* under the guidance of a national and two expatriate consultants. Individual lessons were piloted in government, semi-government, non-government, urban and rural secondary schools, in different parts of the country during 1993. This was followed by a syllabus and Textbook Revision Workshop left for secondary school teachers and English language specialists at the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in Dhaka after which further revisions were made.

Development of curriculum, syllabus and textbook is a continuous process with the changes of time and societies. To face the challenges of the new country, this book has recently been rationally evaluated and revised by a group of experts, curriculum specialists, subject specialists, teacher trainers and classroom teachers. Attempts have been made to make the book free from errors and mistakes as far as possible. Illustrations in the book have been improved to make them more relevant and helpful to understand context (Preface of the book *English for Today* for class viii, 2001).

Finally, this modified textbook was introduced in the classroom in 1998. The book follows the communicative approach to teaching and learning English in Bangladesh situations. It provides a variety of materials such as reading texts, dialogues, pictures, diagrams, tasks and activities. These materials were designed and developed for learners' practice in the four basic language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. As a result, classes are expected to be interactive with students participating actively in the classroom activities through pair-work, group-work as well as individual work. In keeping with the communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, the book includes topics from both national and global contexts, appropriate and interesting to the learners thematically, culturally and linguistically. Also adequate grammar elements have been integrated with language skills, so that the elements taught and learned in classroom situations can be easily transferred to real life use and just not to be memorized as discrete items.

Authors and Publishers' Information

Textbooks are usually commercial products. Van els *et al.* (1987) pointed out that commercial considerations are involved in the information provided by publishers. Leaflets from publishers are hardly useful in textbook selection, because they intend to advertise their publications. They are not independent or unbiased, and for that reason do not meet the standards to be set for textbook description. They also define giving information as the provision of pertinent and verifiable details about a textbook, and

conclude that authors and publishers can hardly be said to give such information. According to opinion of Van els *et al.*, (1987), the provision of such information is primarily the tasks of the author, who has this information at his disposal. The author should also give a motivation for the objectives and design of the textbook.

Aims of English for Today

The revised textbook is expected to meet the real needs of students and teachers and eventually should result in more effective teaching and learning of English. The main aims of the revised textbook are (preface of the book *English for Today* class vii, 2001):

- i) to introduce effective communicative techniques, integrated with existing well-tried traditional methods.
- ii) to provide adequate practice in language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- iii) to include adequate elements of communicative grammar.
- iv) to integrate such grammatical elements with language skills so as to make grammar genuinely functional.
- v) to suggest a clear teaching methodology within the framework of actual lessons.
- vi) to create more opportunities for interaction (between teachers and students, and students and students).
- vii) to adopt the existing topics so as to make them more interesting and acceptable.
- viii) to introduce an integrated workbook element in order to develop writing skills at an appropriate place.

The revised textbook intends to meet the real needs of the students and teachers and eventually result in more effective teaching and learning English in Bangladesh.

Analysis of learners' needs

In recent years, much emphasis has been put on information from and about learners. Assumption about the learners' purpose in undertaking a language course, as well as the syllabus designer's belief about the nature of language and learning can have a marked influence on the shape of the syllabus on which the course is based.

Learner's purposes will vary according to how specific these are, and how immediately they can employ their developing language skills. Techniques and procedures for collecting information which are to be used in syllabus design are referred to as needs analysis. In needs analysis, the analysts not only collect information about why learners want to learn the language, but also information about such things as social expectation, and teaching / learning constraints, and the resources available for implementing the program.

Methodology

The study was conducted among 250 students and 125 teachers from different types of secondary level education in Bangladesh.

- i) Government and semi-government schools which follow the curriculum of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) are approved by the Government.

- ii) Madrashes: There are two categories of madrashes-one Alia Madrasha and the other Qawmi Madrasha. While Madrasha-e-Alia is recognised by the government, Qawmi Madrasha is not recognized. Alia Madrashes are run by the Bangladesh Madrasha Education Board which follows the traditional curriculum and syllabus.
- iii) English medium schools: These schools are mainly located in urban areas. They generally do not follow the syllabus provided by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). Instead, they follow the British or American curriculum.

The questionnaires for both students and teachers were randomly distributed among the teachers and students of the above mentioned schools. Two questionnaires one students' questionnaire and the other teachers' questionnaires were developed and piloted for the present article. These questionnaires were developed on the basis of the ones designed by Zughol and Hussein (1985), by the curriculum development cell, IIT Kanpur (NEST Folder-2). Both the questionnaires were intended to investigate:

- 1) Priority of language skills and
- 2) Utility of prescribed text book *English for Today*

Students' questionnaire no. 1- Which of the following English language skills, do you think is more important for you than others?

- a) Listening b) Speaking c) Reading d) Writing

Students' questionnaire no. 2- Do you think that the course in *English for Today*, can improve your English?

- a) Yes b) No

Students' questionnaire no. 3- Does the text book *English for Today* emphasize sufficient practice in language skills?

- a) Yes b) No

Students' questionnaire no. 4- Are the exercises in the text books same as your real life situation?

- a) Yes b) No

Teachers' questionnaire no. 1- Which of the following English language skills do you think is more important for your students than the others?

- a) Listening b) Speaking c) Reading d) Writing

Teachers' questionnaire no. 2- Are you satisfied with the courses in *English for Today* at the level of class six to ten?

- a) Yes b) No

Teachers' questionnaire no. 3- Are the present English courses relevant to the students' needs and job requirements?

- a) Yes b) No

Teachers' questionnaire no. 4- If *English for Today* is taught properly it can be used to develop language abilities. Do you agree with this view?

- a) Yes b) No

Results and Discussion

The present investigation was conducted as a first step towards the identification of the learners' needs of English at secondary level in Bangladesh. The students questionnaire item no.1 and teachers questionnaire item no.1 clearly show that both teachers and students from government and semi government schools, madrasas and English medium school agree that the most needed skills is speaking. Thus the order of preference in which they arranged four skills is as follows (Table-1).

Table 1: Priority of language skills by students and teachers questions item no 01

Language Skills	Government & Semi-govt. schools		Madrasha Education		English Medium Schools	
	Position		Position		Position	
	Student's Response	Teacher's Response	Student's Response	Teacher's Response	Student's Response	Teacher's Response
Listening	4th	4th	4th	4th	3rd	2nd
Speaking	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st
Reading	3rd	3rd	3rd	3rd	4th	4th
Writing	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd	3rd

This arrangement is quite convincing especially in a country where English has got to perform a role of paramount importance and carries a prestige attached to it. The productive skills (speaking and writing) will be given primacy over receptive skills (reading and listening) in both government and semi- government schools and madrashas. In English medium school students gave same priority as government and semi-government schools and madrashas. But the teachers gave little different responses. The teachers gave first priority to speaking, second priority to listening, third priority to writing and fourth priority to reading respectively. Most of the teachers engaged in teaching English at our schools have not been trained in making an effective use of the prescribed materials. They fail to impart effective and enjoyable teaching by rousing students' interest in the subject. As a result students tend to look upon English as a dull and difficult subject on the curriculum. Consequently, they teach very little English which somehow enables them to pass the examination but does not prepare them to use English in real life situations in future (Hoque *et. al.*1997).From the students' and teachers' responses to the utility of prescribed texts, it is clear that much emphasis was given on speaking and writing skills and listening and reading were less priority. In comparison to madrashas and government and semi government schools, the students and teachers of English medium schools practiced more English through textbooks and other materials. Most of the urban and rural teachers say that a few of their students use English in family environment and some teachers say that none of their students use English in family environment. The teacher community needs to be efficient enough to cope with the changes brought about in ELT curriculum, syllabus, and methodology at the national level. Although a good number of teachers have received pre-service or in-

service training in teaching English as one of the main subjects, only a few of them are trained in communicative language teaching (CLT).

As a result, introduction of communicative text books in schools is necessary for the teachers to be trained in communicative methodology of English Language Teaching (ELT). However, after the introduction of new syllabus and revised *English for Today* the NCTB offered a training program for the teachers of secondary schools in cascade system. So far teaching force is concerned, a large number of teachers are not yet trained in ELT, only a few of them have acquaintance with the modern development in the field of language teaching.

Table 2: Teachers' responses from various institutions

Teacher question no.	Government and Semi Government Schools		Madrasha Education		English Medium Schools	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
02	78	22	79	21	90	10
03	18	82	15	85	81	19
04	88	12	92	08	75	25

In teachers response item no 02, the majority of the teachers from government, semi-government and English medium school responded positively. In item 03, majority of the teachers responded negatively and item 04, most of the teachers responded positively and only a few teachers responded negatively. The responses are shown above the table -02.

Table 3: Students' responses from various institutions

Student question no.	Government and Semi Government Schools		Madrasha Education		English Medium Schools	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
02	67	33	64	36	86	14
03	61	39	57	43	75	25
04	18	82	19	81	17	83

In students response item no 02, the majority of the students answered positively. In item no 03, most of the students marked yes and item no 04, almost all the students responded negatively. Their responses are shown above the Table-03.

The text books, series of *English for Today* carry exercises at the end of the story or essay or poems. Each exercise focuses on one or more than one skills. The skills are integrated. Although the texts carry some exercises on each skill and appear to be an outcome of hard work in the process of material production, it is teaching or teacher based, i.e., the skills (which are intended to be carried) do not appear to be incorporated in the exercises.

In the textbook, *English for Today* class six to class ten, all the lessons and exercises include more than one skill. Majority of the topics emphasize on speaking, reading and writing skills. For writing comprehension students take time little more than the other

skills. Therefore, both the teachers and learners want to avoid this writing skill. Sometimes teachers use to give them instruction to write sentences, or passages in their houses or outside the classroom. Such unaided home works, even if completed by learners, are hardly assessed in major cases. Since writing skill is important for student not only in terms of examination but also in other academic contexts, such open ended practice in writing skill will not help learners in improving their writing ability. For listening comprehension *English for Today* for class six to class eight include exercises at the end of the book. Generally students and teachers start their lesson from the beginning of the book. By the time teachers reach this section, they run short of time. During this time students get more business regarding their final examination and thus practice in listening skill is not paid proper attention. They think that reading and writing skills are more important for examination than listening skills. Consequently, they ignore the last part of the book. But in class nine and ten *English for Today*, there is no separate lesson for listening comprehension in this book.

Analysis of learners needs found that students have given priority to speaking, writing, reading and listening skills respectively. But practically, they are not doing sufficient practice in this order. Even the text book does not support in this regard. For academic purposes reading is clearly one of the most important skills. In fact in Bangladesh context we may argue that reading is the most important foreign language skill, particularly in cases where students have to read English material for their subjects, but they never actually need to speak the language. Such cases are often referred to English as a library language. The aspect of share for each skill has been so far discussed from teaching point of view. But a look at the distribution of papers and marks shows that it is only reading and writing with little exercises on vocabulary and grammar, while listening and speaking are altogether missing or ignored. Even this aspect demotivates the learners in improving their proficiency level in oral communication skills. This is so because students are generally examination-oriented.

In *English for Today* some language activities seem attractive for teachers, but do not prove to be very motivating for the learners. A balance, therefore, has to be sought. At this stage it is also useful to consider how the materials may guide and frame teacher-learner interaction and the teacher- learner relationship. In this regard the study examined the treatment and presentation of the skills, the sequencing and grading of the materials, the type of reading, listening, speaking and writing materials contained in this text, appropriate for tests and exercises, self study provision and teacher learner balance in use of the materials.

English for Today considers some of the different ways in which four languages skills may be taught in an integrated way in the classroom. We start by examining situations, which require an integration of skills in order to help learners to complete successfully. After this we consider some different approaches to the integration of language skills in *English for Today*. According to Richards, Platt and Weber (1985) it is the teaching of the language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in conjunction with each other as and when a lesson involves activities that relate listening and speaking to reading and writing. If we look at *English for Today* or around us in our daily lives, we can see that we rarely use language skills in isolation but in conjunction, as the discussion above suggest and even though the classroom is clearly not the same as real life, it could be argued that part of its function is to replicate it.

Conclusion

Such an attempt to investigate the needs for the English language teaching (ELT) at the secondary level in Bangladesh discloses a situation, which is more or less common for the whole society of Bangladesh. Though English is being used as the medium of instruction by the English medium schools, engineering colleges and medical colleges, a small percentage of students are proficiency in productive skills (speaking and writing) in comparison to receptive skills (listening and reading) . The major findings of the analysis of learners needs in this article can be briefed in the following manner:

Firstly, English is important in the life of Bangladesh due to the increased occupational mobility and advancement in science and Technology. Today English has attained the status of global languages and consequently a majority of people have realized the international advantages of learning English. Even the respondents, the teachers and learners at secondary level in Bangladesh, have realized the significance of English and were of the view that though Bengali is officially the medium of instruction, English is often used in and outside the classroom for various academic purposes. In addition, they also reflected the emergent need of being proficient in the English language for everyday and professional requirements in the present day Bangladesh.

Secondly, regarding the language skills, the respondents indicated that speaking is the most needed skill for success at the secondary level, followed by writing reading and listening comprehension respectively. This set of priority as determined by both learners and teachers on the whole shows at least two aspects:

- i) Since speaking has got top priority, it means they need English for some communicative purposes.
- ii) Such prioritizations of language skills provide a base for the selection and gradation of materials for ELT programmes at secondary level in Bangladesh. Writing, reading and listening comprehension for instance largely remain neglected and hence there is a lack of effectiveness in the existing language programmes and also on learners output. These language programmes, despite some of their very effective exercises remain ineffective as they fail to make students proficient enough in these skills.

Thirdly, the above finding might give an impression that in the present study, the responses about language is broken into skills and sub-skills. Actually it was required in this manner, so that the learners to the English language and their needs could be deciphered minutely, premised on which a better and more effective material is produced in order to make the language programmes successful.

Fourthly, since at secondary level, it is a general course in English (i.e. not ESP) the language skills and their sub-skills should be given equal importance. Regarding the prescribed materials of *English for Today*:

- i) The respondents reflects a need for improvement
- ii) They expect a consistent exposure to the language through authentic materials of their own interest.
- iii) They expect the language class to be more interesting and motivating from both materials as well as teaching point of view.

- iv) They expect an equal share to each language skill. They found the present material growing more space to writing and reading skills, in comparison to speaking and listening skills.

References

- Bangladesh Technical Education Board, (1995) *Curriculum and Syllabus*, class ix, English-1, SSC (vocational), reprint 2002, curriculum wing, Dhaka.
- Government of Bangladesh (1972) *Education in Bangladesh*, Ministry of Education, Dhaka.
- Hoque, M.S. 1997. *English Language Teaching and Learning in Bangladesh*, Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur. p 135.
- NCTB (2001), *English for Today*, for class- six, General Education Board, Dhaka.
- NCTB (2001), *English for Today*, for class- seven, General Education Board, Dhaka.
- NCTB (2001), *English for Today*, for class- eight, General Education Board, Dhaka.
- NCTB (2001), *English for Today*, for class- nine and ten, General Education Board, Dhaka.
- NCTB (2001), *English for Today*, for class- ix and x, Madrasha Education Board, Dhaka.
- Richards, j., j. Platt and Weber (1985) *A Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, Longman, London.p-144.
- Van els, T. *et. al.* (1987) *Applied Linguistics and the Learning Teaching of Foreign Languages*. Translated by Van Oirsouw, R. R. : Edward Arnold (Australia) , PVT. Ltd. Australia.pp-299,300-301.