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6. BALANCING CONFORMITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Critical Needs Analysis in an EAP course at Dhaka University

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatism, as understood in the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), refers to teacher and learner subjectivities in a context-sensitive approach to EAP curriculum (Allison, 1996). Such context-sensitive pragmatic approaches consider day-to-day practicalities and constraints with regard to the challenges of, and what is truly achievable within, any given EAP program. From a critical needs analysis perspective, EAP practice is an essentially pragmatic undertaking which requires an optimized understanding of local contexts and the needs of particular cohorts of students. However, studies of EAP, which are predominantly local and regional even when it comes to international contributions, often narrowly align with a handful of accepted EAP research and discourse traditions originating from Britain and North America as accepted centres of influence (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Such reductionist perspectives necessitate greater diversity in research approaches and scopes, as well as international dialogues looking into disparate research traditions and curricular concerns in EAP across cultures and regions.

Bangladesh is ethnolinguistically homogeneous with 98.8% of its population speaking Bangla or Bengali (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2012). From the “despised instrument of the colonizers” (Chowdhury & Farooqui, 2011, p. 148) reminiscent of a long colonial history, English has now become an indispensable instrument readily associated with material and social success for Bangladeshi people. This is significant for EAP learners and practitioners as proficiency in English is a factor in increasing the likelihood of pursuing higher education and, by extension, lucrative employment, professional advancement, and social prestige, all widely seen as inevitable and desirable results of being proficient in English (Hu, 2005). Such extrinsic motivation has led a substantial number of Bangladeshis to master a form of correct English, especially given that studying through the medium of English is a matter of great importance. In order to meet this demand, there has been an increase in investments in English literacies by successive governments across all levels of education in Bangladesh (Chowdhury & Kabir, forthcoming). The offering of EAP courses for undergraduate students by many public universities is one such initiative, and the Foundation Course in English (FC), a first-year compulsory EAP course for English undergraduate students in the Department of English at the Dhaka University, is a specific example of this.
Over the past 15 years, the FC at Dhaka University has undergone major changes from a generic EAP course to a deregulated, decentralized, and more discipline-specific offering to suit the needs of the English Department. However, it has also been criticized as what Benesch (2001) calls accommodationist, in its attempt to fit students within the Department’s perceived objectives of manufacturing a premeditated product, rather than fostering students’ literacy in the conventions of English-language academic discourses necessary to understand their disciplines and successfully navigate their learning, and, most importantly, empowering them through the appropriation of a diversity of academic literacies. Despite a handful of studies conducted on the FC to date (see Chaudhury, 2011; Chowdhury, 2003; Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2008; Khan, 2000), questions about certain aspects of the EAP curriculum, including the need for needs analysis, learner autonomy, student empowerment, and teacher enfranchisement, have remained unanswered. More specifically, whether and how the notion of critical pedagogy has been operationalized in FC to fulfil the stated objectives of the course in a locally sensitive manner is a matter that has not been researched empirically.

The pedagogy of English teaching in Bangladesh has long been characterised by grammar-translation, aligning comfortably with, and fuelled by, a strong reliance on the security of rote learning of grammatical rules and memorisation of vocabulary, translation of (mostly decontextualized) text, and written exercises at all levels. Chowdhury and Farooqui (2011) report how, throughout school education to the higher secondary level, students in Bangladesh are brought up on a heavy diet of grammatical rules and student activities involving mostly mechanical drills. The main problem with such pedagogy has been that students are encouraged to learn the language but not how to use it (Hasan, 2004). With memorisation widely accepted and acknowledged, speaking and listening skills are avoided and never assessed. The resultant effect implicates not only student competence at the tertiary level, but also students’ expectations of a course such as the FC. Due to teaching and learning experienced at the higher secondary level, students are not quite prepared for the more complex demands of teaching and learning in English at the tertiary level, a situation further exacerbated at Dhaka University due to lack of any needs analysis mechanism in place. Such a scenario is an opportunity for curriculum makers and practitioners to consider what a critical-pragmatic approach can offer.

This chapter uses ideas expressed collectively by the teaching staff of Department of English at Dhaka University, as well as curriculum artefacts, to describe the Foundation Course in English (FC) in order to problematize the usefulness of the essentially Western notion of critical needs analysis in the Bangladeshi educational setting. It looks at how, in calibrating the course, a new generation of Western-trained teachers have been challenged in their attempts to emphasize the process-oriented teaching and learning approaches over product-oriented practices. In doing so, this chapter does not deal with the politics of English in general, or the nature of EAP content development in the FC; rather, it looks at how, through the interface of FC teachers’ and students’ teaching and