

GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS: A STUDY ON PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract: English has been included in the education system of Bangladesh for a long time. However, after getting twelve years education in English, learners average competency in spoken English at tertiary level is not yet up to the standard which is a consequence of negligence of teaching speaking at every level of education (Imam, Ropum & Arif, 2013). Unlike the private universities, the public universities of Bangladesh hardly give emphasis on communication skills to make the students able to compete in the job market. Consequently, graduates are found to have problems in communicating in English and they feel shy to speak in English (Azizul, 2010 in Tahereen, 2015) and often in the job market their communication ability fails to impress the interview board. This paper aimed to find out are the public universities offer any Spoken English course and to what extent communication skills is given emphasis on the other compulsory disciplinary courses. Two public universities inside Dhaka had been selected to find out the answers of the central research questions. Interview questions for the teachers and classroom observation checklist have been used to collect data. As a theoretical framework this paper has used Brown and Yule's framework of three types of speech (1983). It is found that in public universities most of the departments do not offer specific spoken courses and even they do not give any emphasis on spoken skills on other disciplinary courses which create adverse effects on graduates' employability.

Keywords: Graduates, public university, communication skills, employability

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

English is the most commonly used language in the corporate world; the knowledge of English is one of the most important employability skills. Knowledge of English does not mean only the ability to make grammatically correct sentences rather it means other related skills for effective communication like presentation skills, convincing and negotiation skills. On a report titled "GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN ASIA" conducted by UNESCO Bangkok in 2012, it is found that among the other criterion for employability it is the "communication skills" that is given the most priority. According to Farooqui, (2007) there is no doubt that in this communication oriented age, speaking is more important than ever (as cited in Akter, 2011). And the reality of the corporate world is the companies consider the candidate's ability or inability to speak fluently in English as one of the major selection criterion (Jyothi, 2012). Again in 2015, Victoria University's Careers and Employment Service carried out an Employability Skills

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Survey. The goals of the survey were to identify the top ten skills and attributes which employers look for in new graduates and students. The findings from the survey respondents showed that among the 10 skills and attributes, “verbal communication skills” is the second one.

But in many ways it is one of the marginalized skills and Bangladeshi students hardly have the scope to learn this at secondary and higher secondary levels, even at tertiary level in our country (Khan, 2007, Bhattacharjee, 2008 as cited in Akter, 2011). In case of offering and practicing courses based on speaking skills, the situations at the private universities appear to be better than public universities. Most of the private universities offer courses which deal with speaking skills which are compulsory for all the students and their aim is improving students speaking and communication ability ((Farooqui, 2008; Rahman, 2005 *ibid*). On the other hand, public universities do not have better infrastructural facilities to do research and to conduct activity-based classes; there is no language lab to practice speaking and communication skill (Saquib, 2009 as cited in Hasan & Labonya, 2016). Learners use at least 70% Bangla to communicate between themselves and with the teacher as well (*ibid*). But in the highly competitive business environment, preparing students for the future career in the job market is considered as one of all universities significant tasks (Chairat, 2016).

So, this paper aimed to find out whether the public universities have specific courses based on speaking and communication skills, and to what extent speaking and communication skills is given emphasis on the other compulsory disciplinary courses and the reasons working behind the negligence of teaching speaking and communication at the tertiary level in public universities of Bangladesh.

The major research questions are:

1. Are the public universities offering any Spoken English course and to what extent speaking and communication skills are given emphasis on the other compulsory disciplinary courses?
2. What are the reasons working behind the negligence of teaching speaking and communication at the tertiary level in public universities?

1.2 Limitations

For time constraints data were collected only from two leading public universities of Dhaka and only 5 teachers from each university were interviewed based on personal contact and convenience. Henceforth, the sample of the study is comparatively small and the findings may not reflect the actual scenario of all the public universities of Bangladesh. However, the findings of the study hopefully bring some light on the issue and make scope for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Education system of Bangladesh and Tertiary Level

The education system of Bangladesh may be broadly divided into three stages: Primary, Secondary and Higher Education. Primary education is imparted in Primary School, secondary education in High Schools and Intermediate Colleges and higher education in

Degree Colleges and Universities (Education Ministry of Bangladesh in Khan and Akter, 2011). Autonomous public Universities, private Universities, Madrasah and colleges under the National Universities are the four different types of Educational institutions at tertiary level (ibid).

2.2 Employability and the importance of English Communication Skills

English language proficiency and the application of communication skills to the world of employment are central to employability (Tuzlukova & Al-Mahrooqi, 2010 as cited in Thomas, et al 2016). Employability involves not just acquiring the knowledge, skills and attributes that are important for gaining employment, but the ability to market these skills and demonstrate them to potential employers and furthermore, to demonstrate how they meet the needs of the local, national and international economic and social communities (ibid). Knight and York's 2004 definition of employability is appropriate here because they described 'employability' as: "A set of achievements - skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (as cited in Arkoudis, 2014).

Graduate students need to be able to brand themselves as confident, motivated, interested and knowledgeable even before entering the workplace to demonstrate they 'fit' and are able to contribute to the workforce. Henceforth, communication skills are essential for career success and often ranked as the most wanted competencies among all requested by the employers in making hiring decisions (Chairat, 2016). The *National Employability Report* by Aspiring Minds revealed that inadequate English and computer skills are the key factors that make graduates unemployable. Among 60,000 Indian graduates, about 16% and 14% of the graduates were employable in sales and customer service operations where communication is the basic requirement (Bharathi, 2016). Again, in India the National Association of Software and Services Companies mentioned that of around three million graduates each year, less than a third of graduates of engineering colleges and only 10% to 15% of regular graduates are employable because at entry level the companies expect the graduates to have certain skills such as communication, interpersonal, ability to speak English and work as a team, and basic computer knowledge but unfortunately there is a huge mismatch between university graduates and the needs of the job market (Mishra, 2014).

2.3 English Communication Skills at Public Universities of Bangladesh

In a study conducted by Nusrat in 2014, it is found that communication skill is the most desired soft skill attribute among the employers of business graduates of Bangladesh. More than half of the employers (51.08%) mentioned the skill as a requirement for the employment. Though it is the responsibility of higher education institutions in preparing students for Employment, preparing them to navigate the uneven playing field of the labour market, developing the kinds of skills that is required by the job market but it is found from the interview findings of the study conducted by Hasan and Labonya, 2016 that teachers have mentioned that lack of training for speaking skill teaching is a problem in teaching speaking skill properly. Learners coming from heterogeneous background are also considered as one of the biggest challenges to teach speaking at public universities in

Bangladesh. According to Mahbub-ul-Alam & Khan (2014), only in some Dhaka City based English medium schools, in some of the private Universities, in the existing twelve Cadet Colleges in Bangladesh, and also in some very few such well-programmed institutions 'spoken English' is taught and there is no emphasize on spoken English on any other organization not even in the public university. In most of the public universities of the country, English has been included in the first year or first semester except in the English Department, and the students somehow attend the class and obtain pass marks in English. After finishing the first year, they usually forget what they have learned. Another problem is with the syllabus and the course contents. Most of the items in the syllabus are based on different grammatical items and there is no scope for communication in English in the classroom. As a result, after passing their graduation students do lack in communication skills in English (Hosain, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1 The Study Method

This research is qualitative in nature as this aimed to provide a descriptive view of teaching speaking and communication skills to students' at public universities of Bangladesh. The sample which was used to collect the data for the study was consisting of ten teachers from different departments of two public universities of Dhaka. The data were collected through interviewing ten teachers (five teachers from each university). The whole data collections were done through purposeful sampling. All the data required for this study were collected in a semi-formal setting. All the collected data were analyzed according to qualitative data analysis design.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

This study has used Brown and Yule's framework of three types of speech (1983); these are talk as interaction, talk as transaction and talk as performance. Talk as interaction means interaction which serves a primarily social function termed as "conversation" while talk as transaction refers to situations where the focus is on what is said or done, message is the central focus and making oneself understood clearly and accurately, rather than social interaction. The third type of talk is called talk as performance which refers to public talk which transmits information before an audience such as morning talks, public announcements, and speeches etc.

As the study concerns with graduates' English communication ability and employability, all the three aspects can be connected with the study. Because in job sector, graduates need to communicate with different people, need to share their ideas and opinions with others, need to transfer information and need to demonstrate their performance in front of others. And to meet all of these three purposes, competency in speaking English is inevitable.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings from Teachers' Interview

For collecting qualitative data for the study, teachers' interview has been taken using semi-structured interview questionnaire. All the teachers mentioned that, it is important for the graduates to develop communication skills because poor communication ability

often ruins their impression when they go for the interview because students feel nervous and often they cannot express their ideas because of the fear of speaking and communication skills in English. It is equally important at the time of recruitment and for surviving in the job sector. But the public universities do not have any specific course for English speaking and some of the teachers mentioned that there are fundamental English course which is not specifically designed for spoken English but integration of all the four skills. There is no emphasis for practicing and communicating in English on the other mandatory disciplinary courses as well.

It is found from the teachers' responses that the public universities have a poor infrastructure for conducting English spoken class. There is no language lab for the students to practice spoken English, they do not have multimedia and even they do not have audio system. Teachers have mentioned about several challenges that they have experienced while delivering lecture in English. At public universities students come from different background, a vast majority of them come from rural area, they were not exposed to English environment in their previous educational institution as a result they feel lost if the lectures are given in English. The students of public university prefer lectures in Bengali because they do not understand English medium instruction, so, it become difficult for the teachers to conduct classes in English.

The class size is large at public universities; there are 120-150 students in a classroom, so it is not possible for the teachers to test individuals speaking ability. One of the teachers mentioned that, there are some teachers who are not proficient enough to conduct the full class in English. All the teachers' have mentioned that, in regards of speaking exposure/practice in English, the private universities students are getting more benefits than the public university students. In private university the medium of instruction is English irrespective of departments, there is presentation, class participation, group work, pair work for the students where they need to speak in English but there is nothing like this at public university. In the syllabus, there is nothing where students get the opportunity to communicate in English, there is no group/pair work where students can communicate with each other. Teachers have mentioned that, as English has already been flourished, so graduates when go for job market suffer because of their lack of proficiency in English. In order to improve the situation, there should have some changes in the syllabus, authority should provide logistic support to practice speaking English, training should be given to the teachers so that they can conduct classes in English.

4.2 Findings from Classroom Observation

Classes were observed for getting the real scenario which was essential to analyze data for the study. It is found from class observation that, though the classes are meant to be conducted in English, because of several reasons classes of public universities are mostly conducted in Bengali except English department where the scenario is moderately better. The class size is large, there are 120/150 students in a classroom, the students who are sitting at the back cannot even properly hear the teachers. There is no logistic support for conducting any kind of computer/online based learning activities; even there is no

group/pair work for engaging the students in communication. There is no encouragement on the part of the teachers for communication as well. The classes were mainly teacher centered, the teachers were giving lectures and students were sitting idly. There was no interaction between the teachers and students, not even among the students.

5. Recommendation and Conclusion

So, it is found on the basis of the findings of the study that speaking and communication skill are often overlooked in public university classroom in Bangladesh because it is the mindset of the people of Bangladesh that speaking does not necessitate tutoring or facilitation. But in order to communicate successfully in speaking English, graduates must need to show smoothness, flexibility and such verbal communication skill is learned through practicing and performing.

On the light of the above discussion it can be recommended that:

1. Education stake-holders should give more focus on teaching speaking and communication in English to the public university students so that they can cope with the needs of the job market.
2. Authority should arrange intensive training program for the teachers and should provide them with enough logistic support to teach English Speaking.
3. There might have certain changes in the syllabus and testing system and there might have more focus on the English speaking and communication skills of the graduates.
4. Though there are lots of limitations in public university classroom which are already discussed in this study, but the teachers can make the classroom interactive by providing interesting tasks and activities, so that students can communicate with each other in the classroom.

As communication skills needed to be taught and learned for improving employability skills of the graduates, so it can be concluded that in order to embed workplace communication skills in the course curricular, the designs of classroom activities and assignments of the relevant courses provided for the students at the university should be focused more on correspondence, presentation and discussion, etc. There should be focused on practicing communication skills in English. Besides all these, public universities students can improve their English speaking skills by ensuring quality exposure to English to fit themselves more in the job market.

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Appendix

Teachers' Interview Questionnaire

1. Do you think, developing speaking and communication ability is important for the graduates for employability?
2. Do the public universities offer any specific course for teaching speaking and communication to the students?
3. Is there any emphasis given on teaching speaking and communication in English on the mandatory disciplinary courses?
4. Do the public universities have enough logistic support/ infrastructure for teaching/learning speaking?
5. What kind of problem do you face while reaching speaking at your class?
6. What are the reasons behind the negligence of teaching speaking at public universities?
7. Do you think, students of private universities are getting more benefits in terms of English speaking skill?
8. Do you think, because of poor speaking skills graduates from public universities suffer in job sector?
9. Do you think, certain changes in syllabus can help improving speaking skills at public universities?
10. What the authorities should do for supporting the teachers in developing students' English speaking ability?

Classroom Observation Checklist

1. Medium of Instruction
2. Teacher-student number ratio
3. Logistic support
4. Setting of the class
5. Teacher-student talk ratio
6. Students level of speaking and communication
7. Teachers encouragement and engagement for speaking and communication