

An Analysis of Existing English Fundamental Courses in Non-English Departments at Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University: Limitations and Recommendations

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Abstract: Since proficiency in English is imperative to the success of graduates in their careers, JKKNIU offers basic English courses to its students which are conducted by respective academic departments. In this regard, a qualitative study was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of these courses in fostering communicative skills in students. The research involved the basic English courses offered by ten departments focusing in the challenges of teaching English in Non-English departments, the limitations of these courses and their resolution to enhance learning. The modus operandi included the administration of a survey-questionnaire to the concerned faculty, which encompassed course content to determine if it emphasized communicative competence, the specific pedagogy deployed by the instructors, the availability and use of technology in instruction, and the assessments used to confirm that attainment of the learning outcomes of the course. The results of the study reflect a broad consensus among the instructors. The syllabus was dated and not conducive to ensuring a learner-centered ambiance that can instill communicative competency in the learners. In addition, the lack of access to multi-media for instructional purposes hampered teaching effectiveness. Further, the study revealed agreement about the inadequacy of the assessment process that does not reflect learner competence in listening and speaking. This, the study posits will impede student success in their academic fields and their careers beyond the university. Finally, the findings clearly indicated an urgent need to revise the courses as necessary and offer them in classrooms equipped with appropriate technology. This will optimize student learning and success.

Keywords: Syllabus, Teaching Techniques, Communicative Competence, Interactive Classroom, Eclectic Method, Assessment.

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1. Introduction

For global communication English is the “lingua franca” and is spoken and understood all over the world. According to Chowdhury & Haider (2012), universities offer English courses to meet the language needs of the students who typically take the course, as undergraduates, in their first or second semester of study. For each area of specialization including arts, education, science, diplomacy, aviation, tourism, business, and media, proficiency in English is necessary to access the discipline-specific textbooks and research publications which are published as hard copies or virtually on the internet. Further, facility in English, in local and international contexts, makes the graduate confident and thus competitive in the job market beyond.

At the tertiary level, fundamental or basic English should get particular importance for all students regardless of their area of study. Chowdhury and Kabir (2014) in their summary of the seven post-independence education policies point out how the education policies from 2000 identified the importance of English at the university level and proposed and recommended its adoption as the medium of instruction at that level. Thus, the significance of Foundation and basic courses to the success of the student cannot be overemphasized.

In view of the necessity of learning English, foundation courses should be designed according to the demand of the students of different departments so that after completing the course they can not only get good grades but also can attain professional development at workplace. Undergraduate students of Bangladesh require considerable degree of linguistic competence. Keeping in mind of their needs, the foundation course syllabi should be designed effectively to make teaching-learning more effective.

At JKKNIU, Foundation courses are taught by English teachers and contents usually cover writing and reading skills with a little emphasis on speaking and listening. Students are drilled in basic grammar and writing along with reading comprehension and expected to function at a proficient level. Consequently, it is no wonder that the average students experience difficulties in adjusting to the English dominated job market. Thus, it is imperative that we redesign the basic English courses to focus on listening and speaking skills to give the graduates a competitive edge in their careers.

1.2 Statement of the problem

In Bangladesh, language experts design the English language course at tertiary level in the light of instructions given by University Grants

Commission. The course is expected to meet the language learning needs of their learners within the prescribed time and deadlines. Most often, the departments do not have enough time to evaluate the courses before implementation. This often leads to a hastily put together syllabus that may not address the various levels of students in a class, taught by instructors who may not deploy appropriate pedagogy because they do not have access to the relevant instructional technology. In addition, the course contents are not focused on the four skills necessary for language proficiency. Thus, graduates of these programs leave the university without all the skills necessary to ensure optimal success in their careers.

1.3 Aims of the study

The aims of this study are to conduct an analytical review of the current basic and fundamental English courses offered by ten departments under different faculties at Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University and provide recommendations to enhance their effectiveness.

1.4 Theoretical framework

Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition is widely accepted by the linguist. His most recent research has involved the study of non-English and bilingual language acquisition. In the areas of second language research and teaching his theory has great impact. Second language learning occurs in a very formal way with the study of rules, patterns and conventions which enables one to talk and write. However, language acquisition occurs exclusively with comprehensible input as Krashen believes this. To achieve competence, second language learners need to monitor their production even if the input is comprehensible. If the second language learners are given comprehensible language input, they can monitor their language production. Language acquisition may occur this way. (Krashen, 1987)

Analysing the language, formulating rules, setting irregularities apart, and teaching complex facts about the target language is not language teaching, but rather is "language appreciation" or linguistics, which does not lead to communicative proficiency. Teaching the structure and grammar can result language acquisition only when the students are interested in the subject and the target language is used as a medium of instruction. Sometimes, teachers' talk meets the requirements for comprehensible input with the learners' participation and the classroom becomes a suitable place for acquisition. As the students' conscious efforts are usually on the subject matter, the filter is low to the language of explanation in this regard. Here, the concentration is

given on what is being talked about not the medium. Though the teachers and learners believe that the study of only grammar is responsible for students' progress, the progress is actually coming from the medium not the message.

Based on Stephen Krashen's second language acquisition theory, it can be said that the use of English language should be emphasized over the learning of grammatical structures and patterns. Competence is a process that grows gradually by the use of language in the classroom and outside.

2. Literature Review

Khan (2000) evaluated the English Foundation Course which was being taught to thirteen departments in the Arts Faculty at Dhaka University and found that students felt that communicative competence in English was necessary as the "Lingua Franca". Further, they were also aware that learning English was a prerequisite for getting good jobs, for accessing academic texts and for communication' (Khan, 2000). Regarding the courses, her findings revealed that the syllabus needed to be reviewed regularly to ensure clarity, currency and use of appropriate teaching methodology. She further recommended grammar content should be reduced with a balanced focus on the four essential skills as learners were dissatisfied with their listening and speaking skills. They suggested smaller classes, individual attention, and separate writing and speaking. (Khan, 2000)

Dooley (2006) conducted a study on international students at Curtin University and included both students and instructors to know their perception regarding the importance of listening for academic success. Both the learners and instructors agreed on the importance of listening skills in lectures, group assignments and tutorials.

Huq (2011) conducted a study on Bangladeshi tertiary-level students at private universities and found that the learners came from various levels of language competence and unique needs. Often this was difficult for a teacher to teach within such heterogeneity in the classroom. The learners did not come to the class with equal competence, and they needed a syllabus and instructions aligned with their level of language competence.

Rao (2014) recommended in a study that respective departments should have well equipped laboratories with competent trainers. He suggested a practical system of teaching and learning where learners could get enough exposure to the language by interacting with the teacher and peers. In addition, the syllabi should be designed based on the practical needs of the learners.

Akhiroh (2017) conducted a study on the teaching of English in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia and found that the teachers/lecturers needed to revise the curriculum by building a connection with the fellow non-major English learners. While revising and modifying the curriculum, he recommended involving the teachers of relevant fields to focus on group discussion among the teaching team. The study generated a hypothesis that this step would improve other aspects in ELT for non-English departments to build an effective teaching platform.

Kusni (2007) in a study on the undergraduate ESP learners of Indonesia found that English teaching did not get much attention from some related parties and thus research was necessary to reformulate the English teaching at non-English major departments. Similarly, Kusumaningputri (2010) opined that to develop the skills of learners in non-major English departments, respective universities should focus on teacher, material, facilities, institutional facilities, and students.

Tohura (2016) conducted a study on the expectations of undergraduate learners from the English foundation courses at a private university in Bangladesh and recommended that the classroom environment should be interactive, and learner centered as well.

However, Ibrahim (2016) emphasized a needs-based syllabus focusing on learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP). He stated that learners need English for academic purpose, future jobs and to communicate with outward worlds. For this purpose, most of the departments lack needs-based syllabus to meet their goal.

Similarly, Siddique (2017) suggested that at the tertiary level in Bangladesh, English language courses should be designed not only to gain good grades, but to prepare students for their chosen professional fields. For this purpose, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is more applicable than foundation/general/basic English language courses.

In addition to the debate between ESP and EFC, it is important to address the problems of effective English teaching and learning at the undergraduate level in Bangladesh. The learners should have enough command of the English language so that they can be proficient and competent to contribute to their professional field and communicate in social situations.

2.1 An Overview of the Foundation English Courses

The English foundation courses offered at Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University have similar characteristics. The present study scrutinizes the syllabi of ten departments of this university: Department of Bangla Language

and Literature, Department of Music, Department of Philosophy, Department of Film and Media Studies, Department of Local Government and Urban Development, Department of Folklore, Department of Economics, Department of Anthropology, Department of Statistics, Department of Computer Science and Engineering and Department of Management. In the undergraduate programmes, these courses which do not include discipline-specific content, are offered in first and second year of study and are taught by English teachers. The course addresses language practice activities and emphasizes grammatical conventions. Thus, grammar-based teaching is the norm.

The courses have grammatical items like parts of speech, tense, sentence, use of prepositions, phrases, clauses, voice, narration, transformation of sentences, right forms of verb, completing sentences etc. In addition, they also have some segments on reading comprehension to develop vocabulary and reading strategies without specifying the reading materials. The teacher has the freedom to choose unseen passages for practicing in the classroom and finally insert in the examination.

In respect to developing writing skill, the courses include writing paragraph, formal and informal letters, applications, writing CV and cover letter, reports, email, dialogues etc. The composition part includes a variety of compositions like descriptive, narrative, argumentative, comparative and contrast etc.

Regarding speaking and listening, the syllabi include the IPA symbols for pronunciation, accent, and intonation. Also, some strategies of listening and speaking are included in the syllabi with a little scope for using audio and visual materials.

Among the syllabi of the departments mentioned, very few of them specify a teaching methodology. Some of them emphasize the use of oral presentation of the learners, taking notes, imaginary oral conversation, while others suggest polite encounters, making dialogues and playing roles.

In general, the syllabi do not offer the scope to measure two major skills, Speaking and Listening. Here, only reading and writing are emphasized. However, the syllabus of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering offers the scope to measure four skills as the course is titled as *Developing English Skills Lab*. But there is no language lab at this university, and it becomes difficult for a teacher to measure the listening proficiency of students. As these two skills sets are not measured in the final assessment, learners do not take them seriously. Thus, the aims or objectives of the

Foundation English Course are not aligned with the content and the assessment process.

3. Methodology

To collect data, the study used a questionnaire which was prepared with the blending of both open-ended and closed ended questions. Part A consists of closed-ended questions and part B consists of open-ended questions. The survey was administered to ten faculty members from the Department of English language and Literature who were assigned to teach the Foundation English course at different departments at Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University. The format of the questionnaire is shown in Appendix-A. Descriptive questions addressed the limitations of syllabi, challenges of teaching English at non-English departments, use of effective method/methods, teaching of language skills, availability of teaching learning aids, assessment system etc. The data are analyzed in two ways: the closed-ended questionnaires are presented through percentages and the open-ended questionnaires are presented through discussion based on the similarities of the views and verbatim statements from the teachers' responses. The first segment presents the quantitative data while the second segment outlines the qualitative data.

3.1 Presentation and analysis of the Results of Part-A

SL	Questions	Yes	No
1	Are the English language courses perfectly focused on the students' future needs of English?	30%	70%
2	Is the number of English courses offered at Non-English Departments sufficient?	10%	90%
3	Do you think that students' aim and expectations are fulfilled by the English courses offered at the department from practical point of view?	0%	100%
4	Does the syllabus over emphasize on grammar teaching than communicative English?	80%	20%
5	Do the students take the language courses seriously?	10%	90%
6	Is the class size manageable?	30%	70%
7	Do you have enough opportunity to use a multimedia classroom? (Internet, multimedia, and audio-visual materials in the classroom)	10%	90%

The tabulation of responses to the first question from the survey shows that most of the teachers (70%) agreed that the Foundation English Course was not focused on the future needs of English while 30% responded in a positive manner. The results indicate that the syllabus needs modification and it should address learners' needs and goals.

The tabulation of the responses to the second question clearly specifies that the number of English courses offered at undergraduate level is insufficient with 90% responding affirmatively. All through the undergraduate journey, a single course of English is offered, and the results show that it is not enough to fulfill the goal of learning the language.

The tabulation of responses to the third question shows 100% agreement with a point that the goals of the courses are not met from a practical perspective.

The tabulation of responses to the fourth question shows that 80% of the instructors believe in the over emphasis of the teaching of grammar of the present syllabi. There is extraordinarily little opportunity for communicative tasks and activities of the course. Grammar is only one aspect of language and that cannot be the only aspect for teaching and learning.

The tabulation of responses to the fifth question validates the notion that students from non-English departments do not take English course seriously with 90% agreeing with the proposition.

The tabulation of responses to Question no. 6 shows that 70% of the respondents find the class size unmanageable for English language teaching. The clear conclusion is that large class size negatively impacts on the effectiveness of the communicative or interactive classroom.

The tabulation of responses to Question no 7 reveals that the teachers do not have enough teaching learning aids to use in the classroom. Here, 90% of the respondents agree that they do not have sufficient internet, multimedia, and audio-visual materials in the classroom. To ensure effective teaching and learning and to make the learners competent for future goals, it is necessary to make these materials and aids available for the learners.

3.2 Results of the open-ended questionnaire (Part-B)

SL	Questions
1	Do you find it logical to conduct more than one English language courses at the non-English departments? If yes, why?
2	Do you find it difficult to teach a heterogeneous language class? If yes, how do you handle this?
3	What method do you use to conduct the course? What is your preferred method instead? And why?
4	Which skill would you like to prioritize while teaching the English language courses as per the needs of English proficiency?
5	Does the syllabus offer the scope to measure speaking and listening skills in final examination/assessment? If yes, how do you do this?
6	What is your assessment regarding Fundamental English syllabus?
7	What challenges do you face in teaching English communicatively at this university?
8	Please share your opinion regarding the development of Speaking and Listening skills at Non-English Departments.

Q. 1 In the first question the study explores whether English language teachers prefer more than one course at the non-English departments to ensure the goal of communicative competence or not. Most of them agreed that it is impossible for them to cover all linguistic needs as well as to develop the skills of students on a single course. According to one respondent,

We usually find students having a low proficiency level in English. Hence, the number of classes in a semester is not sufficient to orient the students with the advanced level of English.

Similarly, another respondent commented,

It is not possible to cover all required skills development in a single semester.

Most of the students in the language classes are from heterogeneous backgrounds. So, it becomes difficult on the part of the teachers to choose the right topic for lessons in the classroom. If more than one course is conducted, the teachers can categorize the students into elementary, intermediate and advanced groups and teach them as well.

Q. 2 In response to the second question, most of the respondents agreed that classroom is often unmanageable for them. They manage the class by

delivering lecture, using white board in explaining rules, asking questions to an individual or the whole class, holding interactions with the whole class, etc. Some of them like to divide the class into several groups but it may not be conducive to involving all the students in teaching-learning activities equally and effectively. As one respondent says,

It appears particularly challenging to handle a heterogeneous English language class. As we have time constraint, I cannot go on with elaborate categorization. So, I simplify and balance the course content to adjust their unequal level.

Q. 3 In the third question, regarding the use of preferred teaching method, the teachers talked about mixed approaches. Most of the respondents prefer mixed or eclectic method. As a teacher articulates,

Depending on the course content designed by the respective department, I must use GT Method. But I prefer eclectic method to GT method.

Another respondent notes,

I think in our present classroom size, all the orthodox methods are almost inappropriate to conduct such a vast course, so a combined method based on post method pedagogy can be helpful.

In this regard the teachers prefer eclectic method or the combined method.

Q. 4 In response to the question on teaching language skills, the respondents prioritize the four English language skills with special emphasis on Listening and Speaking. One says-

Though all the skills are inseparably connected, I would go for communicative skills.

Q. 5 There is uniformity in the negative responses to the fifth question on whether the syllabi offer the scope to measure speaking and listening skills in final examination/assessment or not. And that was aptly stated by a respondent: *No, in final exams the facilities are not provided.*

Q. 6 In Question no 6 where the respondents present overall assessment of Fundamental English syllabus, most of the respondents observe that it does not provide adequate opportunity to develop two basic skills: listening and speaking. One respondent says,

The fundamental English syllabus should be updated and revised repeatedly.

Most of them think that the syllabus is not effective at tertiary level:

The syllabus should focus on all the skills. The classroom should be reduced to a manageable size and tasks and activities should be designed for such a class. Testing must focus on all the skills.

Another respondent's observation is similar:

The syllabus should focus on speaking and listening content as well. From primary to higher secondary level their English Skills are limited to writing skill. In this competitive world, they lack communicative skills.

Q. 7 The results of question no 7 show that the teachers face challenges while deploying communicative communication strategies. According to one respondent,

First, students are very shy and do not want to participate in conversation. Secondly, it is not possible to engage all the students in communicative class as the class time is limited.

Other challenges include large classes, lack of facilities including language lab, lack of materials, lack of teaching aids, shortage of time, less practical syllabus, less interested students, insufficient logistic support and etc. Another challenge,

Most of the students do not know even the basic rules of sentence forming. They are not willing to work hard to learn English at all.

Regarding distinct levels of learners, the teachers also face problems. One respondent notes:

As most of my students at language classes are from Bangla medium background, I found it challenging to begin the courses communicatively. Moreover, lack of teaching aids hinders the path to reach the goal.

Q. 8 The study also explores teachers' recommendation on how to develop Speaking and Listening skills at Non-English Departments. In this regard the teachers recommended a language lab for each department or at least one central lab for the university. One respondent equivocally states,

While preparing the syllabus, teachers from non-English Departments should consult teachers of English Department. Though the course teacher may switch from English to Bangla, learners should motivate to respond in English. The teacher should involve them in pair work and group work activities and should carefully monitor their performance. The teacher should be friendly, helpful, and patient.

The respondents also suggest specific content, assessment, and separate marks distribution for Listening and Speaking skills. Another response in this regard notes,

Firstly, it is necessary to develop testing system for speaking and listening skill. Secondly, we need to produce syllabus with interactive tasks and activities and work for these. Thirdly, we must make all the required teaching aids and sufficient interesting materials available.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

The findings of the study are clearly aligned with the published research concerning the need and effectiveness of fundamental English courses that are offered by discipline-specific departments Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University to ensure communicative competency in their students. The analytical review underlines the fact that to be effective-

- a) The courses need to cover all the four basic skills with comparative emphasis on each area with specific pedagogies for each skill and avenues to assess each skill area.
- b) A uniform format needs to be developed for all syllabi with a focus on practical outcomes in the context of Bangladesh. It needs to be user-friendly and clear from the perspective of the student/learner. Focus need to be on the essential practical skills that are necessary for success in the local environment.
- c) Another fundamental or basic English course needs to be added with the four skills distributed between the courses.
- d) The class size needs to be reduced since interactive skills are best taught in classes with fewer students.
- e) A listening/speaking lab needs to be made available to all students enrolled in the fundamental or basic courses.
- f) Instructional technology including access to the internet and multimedia needs to be available in each classroom.
- g) Opportunities for training in the appropriate pedagogy should be made available to all instructors.

It is the belief of the researchers that implementing the recommendations will enhance learning and student success at JKKNIU and beyond.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for the Teachers

Part- A

SL	Questions	Yes	No
1	Are the English language courses perfectly focused on the students' future needs of English?		
2	Is the number of English courses offered at Non-English Departments sufficient?		

3	Do you think that students' aim and expectations are fulfilled by the English courses offered at the department from practical point of view?		
4	Does the syllabus over emphasize on grammar teaching than communicative English?		
5	Do the students take the language courses seriously?		
6	Is the class size manageable?		
7	Do you have enough opportunity to use a multimedia classroom? (internet, multimedia and audio-visual materials at the classroom)		

Part- B

1. Do you find it logical to conduct more than one English language courses at the Non-English departments? if yes, why?-----

 2. Do you find it difficult to teach a heterogeneous language class? If yes, how do you handle this? -----

 3. What method do you use to conduct the course? What is your preferred method instead? And why? -----

 4. Which skill would you like to prioritize to teach in the English language courses as per the needs of English proficiency?-----

 5. Does the syllabus offer the scope to measure speaking and listening skills in final examination/assessment? If yes, how do you do this? -----

 6. What is your assessment regarding Fundamental English syllabus? -----

 7. What challenges do you face in teaching English communicatively at this university?
 8. Please, share your opinion regarding the development of Speaking and Listening skills at Non-English Departments.
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