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English language teaching, learning and assessment in Bangladesh:
Policies and practices in the school education system

Duncan Hunter and Tasnim Zaman

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Contents

Introduction to the series

Across South Asia, English is widely seen as the language of social mobility, educational opportunity, employability, global business and dialogue. Many consider English language skills to be an essential component of economic development and growth – both on an individual and national level. However, the inclusion of English within language-in-education policies that must simultaneously promote other national languages, along with its history as a colonial and/or elite language in most countries in this region, means that it does not always sit easily within education systems. The place of English within school systems in South Asia has fluctuated over time and a number of challenges remain around ensuring equitable, high-quality provision of English language teaching and learning for all who want or need it.

This report is one of a series of five focusing on the policy and practices relating to English language education in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It aims to provide a contemporary snapshot of the role that English currently plays within the lives of school children and the wider community. It explores the current scenario, considering both the private and government school sectors, including reflections on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. It also looks to the future: how might some of the current challenges be addressed, and what opportunities exist to support the development of this aspect of the school education system?

Across the series, the author teams collaborated in defining the overall focus and structure, and peer-reviewed each other's work to provide feedback and ensure coherence across the reports. The authors have focused primarily on a review of policy documentation, reports and data provided by relevant government departments, academics and international agencies. This is supported by input from a small number of important stakeholders such as teachers, curriculum and textbook writers, and policy officers. Their input is often included verbatim to provide further contextualised insight into the realities of the classroom and wider education system.

Providing a detailed overview of even a single subject like English within any school education system is a significant task, particularly in large, complex and multilingual countries. Coupled with the historical, political and cultural factors that are unique to English in South Asia, we are conscious that these reports have their limitations and can serve mainly as an entry point to this vast and complicated topic. Nevertheless, we hope that readers will find them informative and useful for critical discussion, research and development – particularly those who are involved in English language education implementation in this region.

To access the full series of reports, please visit our TeachingEnglish website: www.teachingenglish.org. uk/article/english-language-teaching-learning-assessment-south-asia

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BANBEIS	Bangladesh Bureau of Education Information and Statistics
BBC Janala	British Broadcasting Corporation Janala (English language programme)
BCS	Bangladesh Civil Service
BEd	Bachelor of Education
BPSC	Bangladesh Public Service Commission
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CinEd	Certificate in Education
DipEd	Diploma in Education
DfID	Department for International Development
DPE	Directorate of Primary Education প্রাথমিক শিক্ষা অধিদপ্তর (the autonomous body responsible for primary schools' administration)
DSHE	Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education
EIA	English in Action
ELTIP	English Language Teaching Improvement Project
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
HSC	Higher Secondary School Certificate
JSC	Junior School Certificate
MoE	Ministry of Education শিক্ষা মন্ত্রণালয় (the ministry responsible for secondary, vocational and tertiary education in Bangladesh)
MoPME	Ministry of Primary and Mass Education প্রাথমিক ও গণশিক্ষা মন্ত্রণালয় (the ministry responsible for Primary (Class 1–8) and Mass education)
NAEM	National Academy of Educational Management
NAPE	National Academy for Primary Education (the government academy training primary teachers in Bangladesh)
NC	National Curriculum
NCTB	National Curriculum and Textbook Board জাতীয় শিক্ষাক্রম ও পাঠ্যপুস্তক বোর্ড (an autonomous body who develops, produces and distributes curriculum and textbooks)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NUB	National University Bangladesh
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PEC	Primary Education Completion
PTI	Primary Teacher Training Institute
RNGPS	Government-Assisted Registered Non-Governmental Schools
SCT	Sub-Cluster Training
SK	Shishu Kallayan (Child Welfare)
SSC	Secondary School Certificate
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TMTE	Training of Master Trainers in English
TTC	Teacher Training College
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
URCs	Upazila Resource Centres

Executive summary

The purpose of this report is to explore policies and practices related to the teaching of English within Bangladesh's school education system. It aims to describe current educational provision for English, as well as identify areas of challenge where appropriate support could be provided to assist the government of Bangladesh.

The report was produced by investigating key government policies and documents, academic studies and statistical evidence provided by state and international organisations. In addition to these desk-based procedures, we conducted a small number of interviews and a focus group involving local experts. A sample of classroom materials was also assessed.

Owing partly to its negative association with periods of external (British, then Pakistani) administration, English does not have any formal status in Bangladesh. It is less commonly spoken in Bangladesh than other South Asian nations. Nevertheless, English is increasingly valued as a means of improving individual opportunity and gaining access to IT-related and other international-facing employment.

Government education policy has made strides in recent decades to improve participation in school education. The 2010 National Curriculum document represented a significant milestone in the country's education history. It introduced a standard national curriculum that established English as an important school subject taught at every level of the school system.

The multilingual context of English language teaching in Bangladesh is complex. While Bangla is the most widespread language, many Bangladeshis also speak another indigenous language as a first or second tongue. Urdu continues to be used by a significant minority and Hindi enjoys popularity, particularly in the field of entertainment.

The profession of English language teaching in the school education system continues to experience challenges in terms of its status and procedures for training. Teaching in general does not seem to enjoy a high level of status compared to civil service positions and some new teachers do not select it as their first choice of profession. Many teachers begin work without training and acquire qualifications only after they have started teaching. While training schemes offered in association with overseas agencies have provided valuable expertise, care needs be taken to develop local capacity in teacher education.

Bangladesh produces its own textbooks, and coursebooks for English have been designed increasingly to reflect the goals of a communicative language teaching approach. Nevertheless, some materials-related issues persist, with a lack of clear progression between levels, the absence of a teachers' book for the national coursebook and insufficient training provided to use materials effectively.

The effect of high-stakes public examinations on learning represents perhaps the most significant challenge to effective English teaching in schools. Important English examinations lack a listening and speaking component. As teaching narrows towards preparation for these exams, classroom work focuses increasingly on reading, writing and grammar.

At the time of writing, the government has recently announced that a new curriculum is to be introduced, with the earliest reforms implemented from 2023. The policy changes are likely to be as significant as those effected by the milestone 2010 curriculum document. Key elements of reform include a reduction in the importance of public examinations and the issue of new materials that reflect a competency-based syllabus. The changes directly address many of the issues identified by this report. Those seeking to assist the government in developing English language teaching should explore supporting the reforms' implementation so that teachers are able to carry out the planned improvements.

1 Introduction

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is a riverine nation in South Asia that shares land borders with India and Myanmar. Its current population is over 160 million with 98 per cent of its people speaking the national language of Bangla as a first or second language (Simons and Fenning, 2018). Partly due to its associations with historical periods of external administration, English does not have any official status in Bangladesh (see Section 3). However, it is considered increasingly valuable by Bangladeshis seeking employment in fields such as IT and the banking sector. Bangladeshi government policy in recent decades has supported English language education as a means of developing a skilled, internationalised workforce.

Bangladesh offers children ten years of free compulsory education, starting from the age of six when pupils enter the first stage, Class 1, of their schooling. This report explores policies and practices related to the teaching of English within this school education system. It aims to describe present provision for English language teaching, as well as to identify areas of challenge where appropriate support could be provided to assist the government of Bangladesh.

In the next section of the report, we provide an overview of the education system in Bangladesh for Classes 1 to 10, describing how it is structured and administered. Section 3 provides further context, exploring the role that English plays in Bangladeshi society and looking particularly at its perceived value as a means of furthering individual opportunity. Section 4 provides a description of key events, policies and institutions that relate to English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh. Section 5 addresses how the teaching and learning of English takes place in classrooms, looking at issues of assessment, materials, use of ICT and the role of non-state language education providers. Section 6 provides information on teacher education, qualifications and training. The final part of the report discusses opportunities, challenges and future trends in English language education in Bangladesh.

The report is largely based on desk-based research conducted in November and December 2021. To understand Bangladesh's educational system and its provision for English language teaching, we accessed key government policies and documents and statistical evidence provided by government and international organisations. Additionally, we accessed peer-reviewed academic studies that provided an analysis of local conditions.

We also analysed a sample of the official English textbooks provided to learners from Class 1 to Class 10 by the NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board. To gain further insight into classroom and school-based practice, we also conducted interviews and a focus group with classroom teachers, academics and other experts:

- Individual interview (I1): An academic researcher from an established Bangladesh university

- Individual interview (I2): A curriculum designer and NCTB adviser

- Focus group discussion (FGD): Three teachers selected for their experience of a variety of local teaching contexts (rural Bangla-medium and bilingual schools; urban bilingual, international, English-medium and faith schools). One participant was also a master trainer.

Throughout the report, we have attempted to mitigate the limitations of desk-based research by referring carefully to the advice of these local experts and practitioners.

2 The school education system in Bangladesh

Three parallel streams of primary and secondary school education operate in Bangladesh: mainstream secular schools catering to a majority (81 per cent) of students, faith-based madrasah (for 17 per cent of pupils) and English-medium schools (BANBAIS, 2021; DPE, 2021, Hamid, 2010; Mousumi and Kusakabe, 2020). The education system has two main stages: five[1] years of primary school and up to seven years of secondary school. Secondary education has three sub-stages: junior secondary (three years), secondary (two years) and higher secondary (two years) (Sultana, 2018). However, the final, higher secondary stage is not formally part of the country's basic education system. Students' admission to this non-compulsory stage is subject to their attainment of acceptable scores in the final year Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination (World Bank, 2016). Students' experience of compulsory basic education therefore nears to a close as they enter the last two years (Classes 9 and 10) of their secondary school study. English is a compulsory subject in the SSC and, jointly with Bangla, currently carries the most weight in terms of marks.

1 Recent pilots have extended primary provision to Class 8

Table 1: Numbers of teachers and students by type of school

Types of institution	Number of institutions	Number of teachers	Number of students
Government primary school	65,566	367,480	12,421,782
Registered non-government primary school	4,841	20,480	684,083
High school attached primary school	2,005	18,478	766,136
NGO (non-governmental organisation) learning centre	9,592	13,034	757,801
Shishu kallayan (child welfare) primary school	205	1,834	31,005
High school attached *ebtedayee* (primary) madrasah	9,303	28,156	1,361,694
Independent *ebtedayee* (primary) madrasah	5,882	27,435	814,401
Quomy (private charitable) madrasah	13,902	73,731	1,398,252
Other primary schools	21,706	189,843	3,316,537
Junior secondary school	2,382	21,395	459,537
Secondary school (private)	15,794	191,633	8,013,929
Secondary school (public)	615	12,556	543,307
School attached to a college (private)	1,324	25,592	1,066,826
School attached to a college (public)	64	1,329	66,092

Sources: DPE (2021); BANBEIS, (2021)

Children in Bangladesh are entitled to ten years of basic education, beginning from the age of six when they gain access to a free place at a state-funded public school (NUFFIC, 2012; World Bank, 2016). The curriculum includes the subjects Bangla, English, mathematics, environmental studies, science, religion (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity), physical education, arts and crafts and music (NUFFIC, 2012). An alternative, madrasah primary school variant focuses on religious education, including Arabic language and Islam. These schools are also funded by the government and subject to the regulations of the National Curriculum (NC).

2.1 Participation in school education

Bangladesh has a large education system with around 31 million students per school year: 18 million in primary and 13 million in secondary (BANBEIS, 2021). There are around 150,000 educational institutions from primary to secondary level including around 130,000 primary-level educational institutions (BANBEIS, 2021; Bangladesh Education Statistics, 2018). Among primary-level students, around 75.2 per cent are enrolled in government primary schools (MoE, 2020). The scale of this provision, especially given the various challenges faced by the country, is therefore considerable. As one commentator has remarked, 'the project of supporting the learning of such a large number of students is a daunting task for a developing country and is accentuated by poverty, unemployment, lack of infrastructures and recurring natural calamities such as flooding and land erosion' (Al Amin and Greenwood, 2018:121). The influx of large numbers of refugees, most recently immigrants fleeing tensions in Myanmar, have added to these difficulties. Despite these considerable challenges, Bangladesh's efforts at including children in its school education system have met with notable success in recent years (Economist, 2021). While four decades ago less than one-third of children in Bangladesh finished primary school, today over 80 per cent complete primary education.

While World Bank reports in the last decade indicated that women lagged behind in accessing higher secondary and tertiary education, the Bangladeshi Government has made considerable progress in reducing educational gender inequality (Sumi et al., 2021, World Bank, 2016). Policy has sought to 'end the mentality that females are born solely to run a household' and today more Bangladeshi girls than boys attend high school (Economist, 2021; Mustary, 2018).

2.2 Education departments and oversight

Key bodies administering education at a state level in Bangladesh include the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME). The MoE is the central government policy-making institution for the post-primary education sector,

dealing with secondary and higher education including madrasah and technical and vocational education. Within the MoE, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) administers secondary (both state and private) schools, including teacher training programmes and curriculum development (NUFFIC, 2012). MoPME deals with primary education and non-formal education, such as programmes to tackle illiteracy that take place outside the school environment (BRAC, 1999: NUFFIC, 2012). The NCTB is responsible for the development of curricula and the distribution of free textbooks to students.

In government institutions, teachers are recruited by the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) and Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE). At the time of their appointment, most teachers are untrained and only begin to work towards qualifications once they are in post. The National Curriculum (NC) 2010 document states that newly appointed teachers are required to complete a permitted qualification within three years of appointment. Training is carried out at a variety of institutions depending on factors including whether they are primary- or secondary-level teachers. Part-time teachers are supported with pre-service and regular in-service teacher training provided at a local level. Further description of teacher recruitment procedures is provided in Section 6.

2.3 Educational outcomes

It is difficult to establish metrics that indicate Bangladesh's comparative international performance in such areas as numeracy and literacy. International assessments have not been carried out in the country and indeed have not been widely delivered in any South Asian nation (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2015). Bangladesh has not participated formally in international comparative tests such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). However, some informal benchmarks of English language performance can be ascertained. Results from a household-based survey show that while 85 per cent of Class 5 students can read stories in Bangla, only 39 per cent can do the same in English (BRAC-IID, 2015). A further available measure of English ability is the English Proficiency Index, compiled by a Swedish education company using an online, adaptive English test of reading and listening skills. According to the index, Bangladesh ranks 65th out of 112 countries and is considered a 'low proficiency' country. A 'city' index compiled by the same company rates Dhaka as having 'moderate' proficiency (EF, 2021).

Key facts about education in Bangladesh

Population

167,086,674

Number of government-funded schools

66,245

Education Boards

Dhaka, Rajshahi, Comilla, Jessore, Chittagong, Barisal, Sylhet, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Madrasah

Number of teachers

992,976

Number of in-school learners

31,701,382

Enrolment rates

Gross Enrolment Rate
104.90%

Net Enrolment Rate
97.8%

Completion rate
82.8%

Primary-level enrolment
75.2%

Number of English subject teachers

(Classes 6–10, teaching routine English lessons)

95,973

Adult literacy rate
74.9 per cent

Expenditure on education
(per cent of GDP)

2.02 per cent (2019)

Compulsory education

Class 1 to Class 10

Sources: BANBEIS (2021); DPE (2021); MoE (2020)

3 The role of English in Bangladesh

Several complexities need to be considered to identify the sociolinguistic context of English in Bangladesh. These include the presence of a number of indigenous minority languages, the persistence of Urdu as a widely spoken language and the introduction of new languages by waves of immigration. A notable recent example of the latter is the increasing use of Rohingya by refugees fleeing Myanmar (Simons and Fenning, 2018).

Bangladesh does not have an official language policy with respect to English (Hamid and Hasan, 2020; Rahman and Pandian, 2018a; Rahman and Pandian, 2018b). The status of Bangla as the national language is unequivocal, spoken as a first or second language by 98 per cent of the country's population (Bangladesh Constitution, 1972; Hamid and Hasan, 2010; Simons and Charles, 2018). Its primacy is confirmed by Bangladesh's 1972 constitution. Demonstrating this, a section of the constitution explicitly gives precedence to Bangla where conflict between English and Bangla interpretations of its content arise (Act: 1972).

The role of English in Bangladeshi national life is not clearly established, occupying the status of a second (NUFFIC, 2012) or even foreign (Chowdhury and Kabir, 2014) language. It is used less frequently for daily communication than in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Its somewhat deprecated status is a result of events in the country's complex history, in which the identification of Bangla as a national language has had a crucial symbolic role.

3.1 History of English in Bangladesh

The history of the English language in the region can be divided into three distinctive phases: an initial period of British colonial rule (1757–1947); a second period (1947–71) when, as East Pakistan, it belonged to the Dominion of Pakistan; and the current period (1971–present) of independent self-rule (Hamid and Hasan, 2020). At the time of the partition of India in 1947, the region became known first as East Bengal, part of the newly formed Dominion of Pakistan, then (in 1955) as East Pakistan. During this period, East Pakistan was administered from Islamabad, then the Dominion's capital in West Pakistan.

Despite commonalities of religion, East Pakistan was separated from West Pakistan by more than 1,000 miles of Indian territory (Mishra, 2013). Although East Pakistan contained more than half of the Dominion's population, Bangla-speaking natives of the region felt increasingly that they were being afforded little respect by administrators in West Pakistan. Language policies imposed from Islamabad came to be identified as part of this oppression.

During the period of its administration as part of the 'Pakistani regime', the country followed central Islamabad policy in using Urdu and English as national languages (Rahman, 2019:03). According to this policy, English was imposed throughout both West and East Pakistan as a second language in 'formal domains such as administration and education' (Rahman and Pandian, 2018a; Rahman and Pandian, 2018b; Sultana, 2018:02). A key element in Bangladesh's movement towards independence was the embrace of Bangla as an authentic, indigenous language not imposed by an external government. The country's struggle for autonomous self-rule involved a conscious rejection of language policies that favoured Urdu and English. In this environment, English became a 'de facto foreign language with a negligible role in internal communication in a largely monolingual country' (Hamid and Hasan, 2020:299). Bangla rapidly replaced English in important areas such as higher education. Bangladesh's first (1974) Education Commission sought to 'decolonise' the education system, diminishing the role of English as a privileged language (Chowdhury, 2014).

3.2 English for international communication

While Bangla is used more extensively in the public sector, English has an increasingly important role in private sector business and industry, where its role as an instrument of international communication is valued. IT and banking sectors in particular require a workforce that is highly proficient in English. Key areas of marketing, merchandising and commercial operations are also important. Increased use of technology, including Facebook and other social media, has raised the profile of English as a valuable international language. The Bangladeshi public in general recognise its value so that 'English is an object of social desire because of a strong popular faith in what the language can offer' (Hamid and Hasan, 2020:299). Recognising this sentiment, the Bangladeshi government has expended considerable effort in recent decades to improve English standards in education, acknowledging its role in developing a sufficiently skilled workforce (Hamid, 2010).

3.3 English in the education system

Since 1988, national education committees have recommended primary school teaching of English, with the 2000 National Education Policy establishing English language education as an extra subject from Class 1 and a compulsory subject from Class 3. The wording of the 2010 National Education Policy recognised English language competence as essential to building a knowledge-based society. Several projects involving international agencies have also been undertaken to support the development of English language education. These include the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), delivered in co-operation with the Department for International Development (DFID)[2] between 1997 and 2008, as well as the more recent English in Action initiative funded on similar lines. A project currently underway is the Training of Master Trainers in English (TMTE) programme, a well-funded (47 Crore BDT, £4.5 million) country-wide primary school teacher development project carried out via a partnership between the British Council and Bangladesh's DPE. It aims to enhance primary-level in-service English teacher education through the training of over 2,000 primary teachers as Master Trainers in English (British Council, 2021a). Concerns have been raised by academics (Ali and Walker, 2014; Hamid and Baldauf, 2008; Rahman et al., 2019) that programmes depending on non-Bangladeshi expertise raise issues of sustainability, weakening rather than developing local capacity for teacher development. The TMTE project at least seems to address this problem, developing Master Trainers who have the potential to serve as a persisting resource of local, national expertise.

3.4 English and individual opportunity

There is a widespread public perception in Bangladesh that knowledge of English provides opportunities for personal achievement. Many Bangladeshis exhibit a strong faith that ability in English confers real benefits in terms of future achievement (Hamid and Hasan, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019). There is a belief even in rural areas that the acquisition of English is an enhancement for the local community, as it facilitates global access, giving a voice to local culture (Seargeant et al., 2017). A report on the actual relationship between Bangladeshis' English language competence and their economic status concluded that knowledge of English did impact on individual status and opportunity (EIA, 2014). Drawing on a range of sources, the reporters concluded that there was a small but significant association, an income 'premium' of around 35 per cent, when an individual had higher proficiency levels in English. The report was cautious, however, in drawing strong conclusions for several reasons including the limitation that the advantage conferred by ability in English depended on the types of employment concerned (Hamid and Hasan, 2020).

Educational opportunities for children vary according to their geographical location and, in particular, whether they live in an urban or rural setting. These tendencies are repeated in terms of access to English language education. Lower general educational outcomes have been observed for poorer rural children (Sumi et al., 2021). The World Bank reports that five million children in Bangladesh 'mostly from poor families, urban slums and hard-to-reach areas are out of school permanently' (World Bank, 2016). Investigations have shown that some rural secondary schools have large class sizes (of 70–80 children) and lack both audio-visual equipment and language labs (Rahman et al., 2019; World Bank, 2016). While these factors contribute to lower levels of English in rural environments, performance in cities has improved owing to the emergence of private English-medium schools in wealthier urban areas (Hamid and Baldauf Jr, 2011; Rahman et al., 2019). As a result of a demand for English language education in those areas, city-based schools have been 'set up to cater to the needs and aspirations of the wealthier class' (Hamid and Jahan, 2015, in Hamid and Hasan, 2020:299). In this way the gap between urban and rural performance in English has been further widened.

One important way in which English language ability clearly impacts on individuals' life opportunities is its role in the country's university education system. Concerning access to Bangladesh's prestigious public universities, experts interviewed during our research identified a disadvantage reportedly experienced by students from English-medium schools. Lacking the knowledge of public examinations gained by their counterparts in non-English-medium schools, these students struggle to gain entrance to public universities. The result is an outflow of talented, English-proficient students who seek opportunities for development overseas. An academic interviewed (I1) for this report noted that:

> [...] the students who go to English-medium schools don't have the chance to enrol themselves in public universities as they are not aware of the exam systems of Bangladesh. Because of the design of the admission tests, they can't get into public universities like Dhaka University as they are not equipped. So, after A-levels and O-levels their only resort is to move overseas. They fail in the admission tests because they don't have the language needed to take the test. A kind of brain drain.
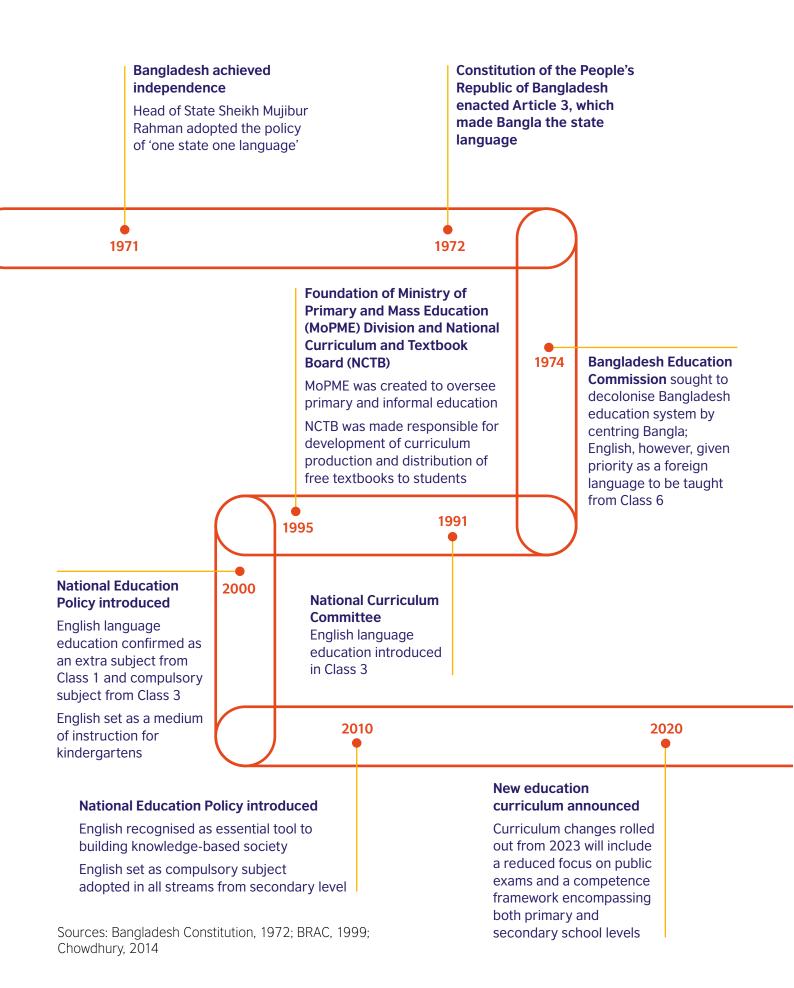
2 The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) has now been replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Similarly, the NCTB adviser we interviewed noted:

The students from English-medium schools are more competent in most of the subjects except Bangla, Social Science and Bangladesh History. Even though they are competent and fluent in English, as they are not used to the assessment system of Bangladesh, they are unable to enrol in public universities in Bangladesh.

At present, English is the medium of instruction (MOI) in private universities, while Bangla is the MOI in most public degree colleges (NUB, 2021). While those attending prestigious public universities such as Dhaka, Jahangirnagar and Chittagong are comparatively the best equipped in terms of English competence, students at private universities graduate better educated in English than those at degree colleges. They therefore have stronger language skills that are essential in certain professional roles. Students at private universities tend to come from wealthier backgrounds where levels of English proficiency are higher.

Education and English language policy timeline

Bangladesh achieved independence

Head of State Sheikh Mujibur Rahman adopted the policy of 'one state one language'

Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh enacted Article 3, which made Bangla the state language

1971

1972

Foundation of Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) Division and National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB)

MoPME was created to oversee primary and informal education

NCTB was made responsible for development of curriculum production and distribution of free textbooks to students

1974

Bangladesh Education Commission sought to decolonise Bangladesh education system by centring Bangla; English, however, given priority as a foreign language to be taught from Class 6

1995

1991

National Education Policy introduced

English language education confirmed as an extra subject from Class 1 and compulsory subject from Class 3

English set as a medium of instruction for kindergartens

2000

National Curriculum Committee
English language education introduced in Class 3

2010

2020

National Education Policy introduced

English recognised as essential tool to building knowledge-based society

English set as compulsory subject adopted in all streams from secondary level

New education curriculum announced

Curriculum changes rolled out from 2023 will include a reduced focus on public exams and a competence framework encompassing both primary and secondary school levels

Sources: Bangladesh Constitution, 1972; BRAC, 1999; Chowdhury, 2014

4 Education policy in Bangladesh

Those institutions responsible for the school education system in Bangladesh – the MoE and MoPME – are also central players in the administration of English language education policy. While documents such as the 2010 National Education Policy make provisions specifically concerning English, it is generally treated as a component of the broader general curriculum, subject to the same regulations.

4.1 Curricula and textbook development

The NCTB is another important agency in the provision of English language learning. It is responsible for the development of English language curricula and the distribution of free English textbooks to students. This expert unit exerts considerable influence on English language teaching throughout the country through its determination of textbook content. Since there are no widely published documents presenting detailed syllabus suggestions for English language study, textbooks may have come to provide an informal, implicit syllabus for many teachers. The Board also determines the content of national examinations at three levels: Primary Education Completion (PEC, Class 5), Junior School Certificate (JSC, Class 8) and Secondary School Certificate (SSC, Class 10). The impact of these high-stakes national examinations on classroom content and teaching is considerable and will be discussed in further detail in Section 5.

4.2 Education and language policy

The official position of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) concerning English language learning and teaching is first that it recognises English as an essential tool in developing a knowledge-based economy (National Education Policy, 2010). Current education policy is based on 28 aims and objectives, which includes Aim 12: 'To attach substantial importance to information and communication technology (ICT) along with maths, science and English in order to build up a digital Bangladesh based on knowledge orientation and cultivation of ICT' (National Education Policy, 2010). The government takes the further position that learning and teaching English should be conducted using a communicative language teaching approach (Rahman and Pandian, 2018b).

While currently the 2010 Education Policy remains in place, a new national education policy was announced in 2020 (Education Sector Plan, 2020). It is unclear how the policy will be enacted at present but there are a number of key directives that may affect the teaching and learning of English language. It is believed that:

- teaching up to at least Class 5 will be in learners' first language; no language will be imposed on any student

- a new structure for four-year initial teacher training will be included (more about procedures for training is explained in Section 6)

- a focus on patriotism will be included.

More will be said about the likely content and impact of the new curriculum in the final section of this report.

5 English language teaching in practice

In Bangladesh, English is usually taught for between four and six hours per week in all types of school, usually from Class 1. English teaching practice and regulation varies according to the type of school. The medium of instruction – generally English or Bangla – also tends to vary depending on the type and geographical situation of schools. In Bangla-medium schools, English is taught as two separate subjects, one dealing more explicitly with components of grammar. Private Bangla-medium schools in urban areas tend to use English as a medium of instruction in English lessons.

5.1 The multilingual context

English education in Bangladesh is delivered to learners from a wide variety of language backgrounds. As mentioned in Section 2, English does not enjoy any official status under the Bangladeshi constitution and occupies a status somewhere between a second and foreign language. While Bangla is spoken as a first or second language by most of the population, several other language backgrounds need to be considered. As an example, Urdu, the official language of the region during its period as East Pakistan, continues to be spoken as a minority language in Bangladesh (NUFFIC, 2012). When the independent People's Republic of Bangladesh came into being in 1972, around one million Urdu-speakers remained in Bangladesh, awaiting repatriation to Pakistan (UNHCR, 2009; Hamid and Hasan, 2020). Some have since been repatriated, integrated into Bangla communities or continue to live in Government-established settlements. A UNHCR (2009) note established that about 250,000 Urdu-speakers resided in Bangladesh, with around 150,000 living in government-run settlements. Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar since the beginning of the 2017 conflict represent a new influx of refugees (CIA, 2021). Their arrival introduces a further significant language requiring integration or accommodation.

Another language of note is Hindi, which is growing in popularity. The language has an especially important role in the realm of entertainment, with Hindi music and Bollywood cinema making local inroads. Arabic, too, has a key role, especially as it is taught in the country's alternate state madrasah system (Hamid and Hasan, 2020).

Forty other indigenous languages are spoken in the country (Hamid and Hasan, 2020). World Bank data from 2008 recognised around 1.8 million speakers of such languages in 2001 (Rahman, 2010). Some commentators (Hamid, 2011; Hamid and Hasan, 2020; Rahman, 2010) have suggested that insufficient effort has been taken to acknowledge and support these languages, some of which are considered endangered.

The MoE's 2010 policies do, however, make mention of these languages and recognise their status. Five ethnic minority languages (Garo, Marma, Chakma, Tripura and Sadri) are now taught at pre-primary level (Hamid and Hasan, 2010).

Classrooms in Bangladesh may therefore contain children with a variety of linguistic backgrounds. This diversity introduces significant challenges for language educators but also provides opportunities to use these existing linguistic resources to develop further language skills and intercultural understanding.

5.2 English language textbooks and resources

Textbooks covering a variety of school subjects have been produced in Bangladesh since its 1971 independence. At present all textbooks are produced and issued by the NCTB, which acts as the sole, state-run authority for their production and distribution. Textbooks produced by the NCTB are not available commercially and are provided for students free of charge. In government-approved secondary schools NCTB textbooks serve as the main instructional materials. This is also the case for English language content (Roshid et al., 2018).

The most widespread English language textbook is *English for Today*, a series that covers the whole range (Classes 1 to 10) of compulsory school grades. In principle, the content of the *English for Today* series implements the policies suggested by the government's educational policy, including the curriculum policies described by the 2010 National Curriculum document. Content of some books in the series have benefitted from input by independent experts (e.g. through the ELTIP project) seeking to improve the communicative content of lessons (British Council, 2012). The books are therefore in principle purposed broadly towards the goal of learning English as a language of communication (Roshid et al., 2018).

In terms of content, a typical *English for Today* book includes 14 units, with each consisting of four or five lessons. Each lesson is organised around a reading passage with linked language tasks. An additional unit contains literary pieces such as poems and short stories. A variety of activity types are included such as multiple-choice questions, gap-fills and information transfer activities (Roshid et al., 2018). Book content also seems to be regularly updated. One interviewee (I1) commented that:

> *...many of the changes have been brought about by the government and they have revamped the curriculum and textbooks. The recent* English for

Today books have incorporated CV writing and application writing and added how to fill out an application for a passport. These are examples I am giving because these things were not there in the previous versions. They have included them in 2021, thinking of the ways we can implement English in our day-to-day life. Most of our people go to various countries as labour and they need to apply for passports, so these examples can be used. These are changes I think are good.

Assessing a sample of the textbook materials, our project team did however note some shortcomings in design and content. Despite the fact that the *English for Today* series covers the whole range of basic education grades (Classes 1 to 10), there is little evidence of clear progression between years. Sample tasks for children and teachers, as well as a teacher's book, are absent. A further issue in textbook content is that activities have an apparent focus on low-order skills related to reading, frequently of the short question and true-false type.

While some teachers using the textbook have assessed its content favourably, issues persist concerning its actual classroom use (Roshid et al., 2018). These include problems of partial teaching, teacher-centred delivery and, as examinations approach, the replacement of its use by examination guidebooks. These are highly oriented towards the examination and do not have sections dealing with listening and speaking (which are not tested in the final examination). An interviewee described some of the problems with these guidebooks, stating:

Guidebooks have solutions for different patterns of questions for English or many other subjects. 'What sort of questions they will get in the board exam?' That guidebook has the solution. The students only memorise that. The writers of the guidebooks are Bangladeshi people but not always specialised in the subject…

Some private schools (both Bangla-medium and English-medium) use supplements, such as the *Fundamental English and Radiant Way* book series, that focus on examination-relevant skills and grammar. The *English for Today* textbook itself is clearly not seen as sufficiently aligned with exam content to prepare learners in the run up to public examinations (Roshid et al., 2018). From the perspective of teachers, the absence of explicit exercises dealing with grammar seems to represent an important gap. Teachers in our focus group suggested that future developments in textbooks could include a strengthening of grammar-oriented work. One participant (FGD-P1) commented that:

The big problem right now I'm facing is that there are no grammar books. There are no grammar books for the kids to follow. But when we used to go to school we had, like from Class 3, I think we had like grammar books and then in secondary levels we also had grammar books that we had to follow very strictly. And right now there are no grammar books or reference books, not even in our own language, like not even Bangla, not even in English. So, nobody knows the rules and regulations [of English].

This comment that explicit grammar instruction has become a less common feature of official textbook content suggests that government materials have become more oriented to communicative goals. While the communicative approach does not preclude grammar teaching, it tends to favour implicit or inductive explicit techniques for language instruction. A study of European countries indicates that teachers in nations with the strongest performance in English, the Netherlands and Sweden, used the least explicit grammar teaching methods (Schurz and Coumel, 2020). Rather than returning to more grammar-focused content, this suggests, a response to teachers' desire for stronger explicit grammar content would be to reduce the emphasis on structural accuracy in public exams. Again, this also points to the need for ensuring adequate teacher training for teachers to use the textbook content effectively to achieve the stated learning objectives.

5.3 Other English language learning provision

Private tutoring, coaching centres and other English course providers are in strong demand in Bangladesh. The number of private providers is very high in urban areas, where more affluent clients are often located. However, the often low quality of mainstream education in rural areas also stimulates learners from many rural families to seek help from private institutions or tutors (Hamid et al., 2009). The quality of private language provision varies widely, and criticism has led the government to impose a framework for their regulation. However, owing to the top-down nature of their implementation, such measures are said to have been ineffective (Alam and Zhu, 2021).

International quality courses for a range of age groups are provided by the British Council from their teaching centre in Dhaka.. Provision for younger learners includes teaching using the Jolly Phonics method. Popular shows such as Shaun the Sheep and Timmy Time are also used to engage learners from primary and pre-primary levels. The British Council provides an in-house magazine for primary and secondary students covering a range of youth-relevant topics (British Council, 2021b). The most popular British Council course provides English language help to students after they have taken the SSC examination (British Council, 2021c). The teaching centre also conducts various English language teacher training courses such as the Cambridge CELTA (Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults), although these are rarely undertaken by teachers within the government school system.

5.4 ICT to support the teaching and learning of English

As a low-lying country, Bangladesh is vulnerable to floods and hurricanes, increasing the urgency for distance learning and online initiatives. In 2010, national flooding was so severe that the ministry suggested imposing a separate starting date for the academic year for students in remote areas. The disaster reinforced a sense of the country's need to provide distance learning for students unable to reach schools or displaced from their own houses. However, such locations, prone to flooding or accessible only by hill tracks, are often without internet access (NC, 2010).

Despite the obvious geographic and climatological need for distance learning provision, a 2020 study (Bizwaz et al., 2020) revealed that few (21 per cent) of students had access to government-provided online learning programmes. Those seeking to widen general use of technology confront the problem that almost seven per cent of schools are yet to have access to electricity. Many of those connected suffer from problems of irregular supply (BANBEIS, 2021). Digital Bangladesh, a government project to widen general use of technology in areas such as education and health, claims successes in improving access to IT in schools so that 87 per cent have computers, 83 per cent internet facilities, 42 per cent computer labs and 79 per cent multimedia access. Almost 55 per cent of schools use the internet and more than 12 per cent use computers for pedagogical purposes (BANBEIS, 2021; Digital Bangladesh, 2021).

Hamid and Hasan (2020) also present a fairly positive picture concerning access to online devices, with around 48 million having internet access (Data Reportal, 2021) in the country and social media, especially Facebook, becoming increasingly popular. The growing ubiquity of mobile phones seems to hold some promise as a medium for English language teaching delivery. 157 million Bangladeshis now have access to a mobile phone (Hamid and Hasan, 2020).

While 50 per cent of households do not have televisions, many learners are aware of, and have access to, television-based learning programmes (Khan and Islam, 2021). Pursuing opportunities using television and mobile technology, the English in Action (EIA) project (2008–2017) introduced the BBC Janala television service to support English language learning in the country. A flagship drama, *Bishaash*, has reached 20 million people. A factual series, BBC Janala Nijey Nijey Shekha, has also attracted millions, though these figures are comparatively small given the size of the country's media market. The EIA project also offered mobile-based teacher development opportunities via SD cards, identifying mobile phones as a comparatively low-cost device for disseminating advice and information (EIA, 2021).

5.5 Assessment of English

The 2012 National Curriculum document specified a model of national assessment that integrates three assessment modes: continuous, 'terminal' (in-school achievement tests of annual content) and public exams. According to the NC documents, continuous assessment should be undertaken to monitor progress and collect data that can be used diagnostically to alter ongoing delivery (Hossain, 2015). In terms of public examinations, students face three tests during the period (Classes 1 to 10) of their school education: the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) in Class 5, Junior School Certificate (JSC) in Class 8 and Secondary School Certificate (SSC) at the end of Class 10 (Hossain, 2015).

The SSC has the strongest gatekeeper role of the public exams, since scores in this test have implications for learners' access to Higher Secondary Schools. The life chances of those who achieve high scores in the SSC are significantly improved, with those achieving strong grades earning more than double the income of those with poorer scores (Sultana, 2018). The two years (Classes 9 and 10) of schooling leading up to the exam are dedicated to learners' preparation for the test. English is a compulsory subject in these exams and 'is considered the most important and tough to pass' (Sultana, 2018:02). Given that students' educational future and life chances rest on success in the examination, it assumes an important status in Bangladeshi society and culture. Publication of exam results is an event frequently reported in national news (Sultana, 2018).

Along with the Bangla language paper, the SSC English examination is worth more marks than any other SSC examination. It addresses writing and reading skills comprehensively, following the directions of the 2012 National Curriculum. The first of two papers covers reading and writing. The reading section uses a variety of task types including multiple-choice questions, matching, gap-filling, information transfer and summarising. Tasks in the writing section include paragraph writing, writing letters and data description. The second English paper covers grammar (45 marks) and composition (55 marks). Grammar section tasks include gap-filling, grammar substitution and identifying correct forms of verbs. The composition section requires students to carry out longer production tasks such as writing a CV or a formal letter.

Some issues in examination design clearly remain. In 2012, national examination content was considered conservative by English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) consultants working in Bangladesh to reform teaching practices; the project leader felt that improvements in areas such as textbook content were 'doomed without the reforms in national examinations' (British Council, 2012:38). Despite the 2012 curriculum document's insistence that all four

skills of the English language be addressed, neither listening nor speaking is included in the examination.

The phenomenon of 'washback', the tendency for educational content and teaching practices to narrow towards the requirements of high-stakes exams, is well recognised in education literature (e.g. Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010). In Bangladesh's public English examinations, a strong negative washback effect is likely to result from the absence of listening and speaking papers, weakening incentives for teachers to practise these skills in class. One interview participant (I2) said that although the problem of washback had been acknowledged, there had been a lack of continuity in implementation:

> The initial plan was to have 80 per cent written exam and 20 per cent practical listening and speaking skills exam. The manual was created by NCTB and a lot of CDs were developed with the help of English in Action. The Secondary Education Programme helped train around 15,000 to 20,000 teachers to examine the skills in various schools and it ran for a few days in different schools, but it was not part of any public examinations like PEC, JSC or SSC. As a result, neither the students nor the teachers really cared about these skills. Being a country with teaching for testing, it just wouldn't work if it is not part of the public examination system.

6 Teacher education

The main general entry route for primary school teachers in government schools is through the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). In the case of secondary and higher secondary schools the agencies involved are the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) and the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC). Teaching vacancies are advertised through the job circular page of their websites (e.g. DPE, 2021; DSHE, 2021). Candidates are required to perform written examinations, with some then invited for an interview via a text message to assess their spoken and analytical skills.

Crucially, training for appointees (in both government and non-government contexts) tends to take place after teachers have been appointed (BEPS, 2012; NC, 2010). The National Curriculum 2010 document states that newly appointed teachers are required to complete additional teaching certification within three years of recruitment. Approved certification includes a (one-and-a-half-year) Diploma in Education (DipinEd), Certificate in Education (CinEd) or a Bachelor of Education (BEd). These can be studied at a Primary Teacher Training Institute (PTI), National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE), Teacher Training College (TTC) or approved university.

As Table 2 indicates, a fair proportion of current teachers already have the qualifications required, with a strong level of attainment evident in government schools. However, data describing achievement of qualifications in madrasah and English-medium schools is absent from these figures and would provide a clearer picture of the situation.

Table 2: Number of teachers trained by type of school

Type of school	Number of teachers	Number of teachers trained (CinEd, BEd, BPEd, DipinEd, MEd)
Government primary school	367,480	159,488
Other primary schools including madrasah	372,991	78,137
Junior secondary school	21,395	78,137
Secondary school (private)	191,633	5,453
Secondary school (public)	12,556	10,275
School attached to a college (private)	25,592	17,423
School attached to a college (public)	1,329	1,049
Total	**992,976**	**405,277**

Source: BANBEIS (2021)

Until recently, some gender distinctions were made in the training process, with lower levels of qualification required for women teachers. These were quite recently removed so that now teachers of both genders are subject to the same requirements. An NCTB interviewee (I2) reported that:

> *Until 2018, any female candidates applying for a teaching position could apply to be a teacher if they had Higher Secondary School Certification and male candidates needed to have a minimum of undergraduate certification. But now, the new rule is that anyone who teaches in a primary school must have a minimum undergraduate certification.*

In non-government schools, appointments are made by the head teacher and the school's management committee. Teachers in this context are expected to have a first degree, not necessarily in an education-related subject.

In general, it appears that school teaching does not enjoy a high level of professional status in Bangladeshi society. Teachers seem in some cases to have turned to the profession 'by default', being recommended for a teaching role on the basis of their scores in the national examination. These scores fall into a range below that needed to secure prestigious and better remunerated Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) positions. Someone who comes into the profession through this route may indeed seek to reapply for the BCS at a later date. Many who begin teaching, therefore, have not selected it as a chosen profession and may indeed view it as somewhat lacking in prestige and remuneration (Al Amin and Greenwood, 2018).

6.1 English language teacher training

Of the approximately 250,000 teachers in secondary schools, about 96,000 teach English as part of their fixed routine (BANBEIS, 2021). By and large, recruitment and training procedures for teachers of English are the same as those for other subjects. An important difference is the type of teaching qualification that English teachers require, which naturally reflects their subject focus. The unofficial requirements for English teachers in secondary schools are slightly different from those in primary school.

Secondary school English teachers are expected to have a minimum of a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in any subject. While taking the BA, they are required to pass an English language assessment as a component of their study. The amount of English language study required varies widely by degree type; one accepted degree programme includes a component worth 600 marks (out of a total of 2,100), whereas the most popular degree type requires work worth

only 100marks (NUB, 2021). While there is therefore an English language component to most approved degrees, a participant in our focus group discussion mentioned that their impression of teachers' language ability was that it varied considerably and that language competence remained poor, particularly in rural areas.. Particularly in rural areas, language competence remains poor. The content of teachers' degree training may contribute to these shortcomings. The amount of English language study required varies widely by degree type; one accepted degree programme includes a component worth 600 marks (out of a total of 2100), whereas the most popular degree type requires work worth only 100 marks (NUB, 2021). Investigation for this report has not identified evidence of any language competence testing using international language assessments such as the CEFR.

As mentioned earlier, teachers should begin working towards the required qualifications within three years of starting work. However, opportunity for attendance 'may not occur for a considerable time and some miss out altogether' (Al Amin and Greenwood, 2018:124).

6.2 Continuing professional development for English language teachers

In addition to the formal training described earlier, pre-service and regular in-service teacher training is offered through Upazila[3] Resource Centres (URCs) and Sub-Cluster Training (SCT) units (BEPS, 2012). Informants in our focus group discussion suggested that in-house teacher training is also sometimes provided to teachers. However, interview and focus group participants have acknowledged that the frequency and quality of the training for Government-Assisted Registered Non-Governmental Schools (RNGPS), English-medium schools and madrasah schools depends on the school administrators, especially head teachers.

Some ongoing, nationally financed schemes supporting continuing professional development (CPD) are provided by the Teacher Training College (TTC) and the National Academy for Education Management (NAEM). The NCTB also arranges a variety of training courses. However, many of these are partnership-funded training programmes of a fairly short duration, lasting only from several days to a month. Sponsors and lenders for such programmes include the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), the UK's Department for International Development, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Dhaka University (Karim and Mohamed, 2019). Several initiatives have been carried out by agencies that have focused on the development of communicative classroom practices (for example, see details on English in Action in Section 5.4 and TMTE in Section 3.3). However,

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3 *Upazila* refers to an administrative region in Bangladesh, roughly analogous to a UK county or borough.

some commentators have suggested that teacher teaching provision remains inadequate with too much dependence on short-term, donor-funded education programmes that cannot alone sustain high-quality classroom practice (Al Amin and Greenwood, 2018).

CPD for English language teachers in Bangladesh has historically been difficult to implement, perhaps partly because it is a relatively new concept for many Bangladeshi teachers and may invoke 'cynicism of teachers overburdened in recent years particularly "with international projects"' (British Council, 2014:231). There is also a problem of scale and cost considering an educational system that involves nearly one million primary and secondary teachers. Rahman et al. (2019:10) are sceptical of what they describe as the 'hyper success claims' of CPD programmes delivered via donor organisations, citing ineffective training materials, lack of frequency of delivery and lack of resources as problematic across a range of CPD. Focus group participants for this project also voiced some scepticism over CPD, noting that 'in-house and mass training' exercises frequently do not have particular aims and are sometimes run by schools 'just to show the funders that they have taken place'. Participants noted that while training was often 'fun' it was not fruitful.

Efforts have been made in more recent projects to address these considerable challenges. The English in Action project's employment of mobile phones as 'the trainer in your pocket' aimed to reach teachers within their own classrooms, sending voiced-over videos, semi-structured lesson plans and other printed activity guides by phone. The project also facilitated local cluster meetings for teachers involved in the EIA project. Teachers felt the project supported them in improving classroom practices and the development of local teacher networks was also effective in maintaining momentum in CPD (EIA, 2014). Other researchers argue that the project was cost effective and could present a way forward for CPD in Bangladesh (Walsh et al., 2013).

The current Training of Master Trainers in English (TMTE) project directly addresses language issues, which this report has already acknowledged as a gap in current teacher preparation practice, by incorporating an Aptis evaluation of teachers' English language proficiency. In the first cohort, 25 per cent of English Language teachers undertaking the programme demonstrated a full level of improvement on the CEFR language proficiency scale (British Council, 2021a). Delivery of the TMTE project has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic but independent evaluation will review the progress of the new initiative.

7 Opportunities, challenges and future trends

There is no doubt that Bangladesh has made strides in extending participation in its school education system, reversing setbacks of previous decades so that 80 per cent of children now finish primary schools (Economist, 2021). In the specific area of English language teaching, policy advances have also been made so that English is now taught at every level of the school system (Chowdhury and Kabir, 2014). Nevertheless, there appears to be a consensus in academic literature that while a great deal of work has been carried out in recent years to improve national English language teaching practices, outcomes have not always matched the efforts expended (Hamid and Hasan, 2020; Rahman et al., 2019). As we have seen, assessments of the nation's English language performance suggest that, despite policy and development initiatives to improve teaching and learning, standards remain comparatively low.

Bangladesh still faces challenges in extending and improving English language use in its population. English is not as widely used in Bangladesh as in other South Asian countries, where it is both more widespread and enjoys stronger official status. Several authors (Ali and Walker, 2014; Hamid and Baldauf, 2008; Rahman, 2019) have pointed to circumstances in Bangladesh's history, namely its rejection of English as a state language at the time of its foundation, as a contributor to its weaker status and less widespread use. Nevertheless, there is presently a clear and growing demand for English in the country.

7.1 The new National Curriculum Framework

A key development when considering the future of English within Bangladesh's basic education framework is the recent announcement of a new 2021 National Curriculum framework. Likely to be implemented from 2023, it appears to involve changes affecting the whole basic education curriculum and therefore will impact significantly on English as a core subject. As this report's account of policy events has indicated (see Section 2), a key development in the history of Bangladesh's English language teaching policy was the 2010 National Curriculum document, which laid down a nationwide curriculum and confirmed English as a core subject. The latest, similarly named, policy is likely to be at least as significant in shaping the context in which English language instruction is delivered in the future.

The Education Minister, Dr Dipu Moni, explained at a recent news conference that the new framework has been released as part of an ambitious initiative to restructure the education system from pre-primary stage to Class 12 (SomoyTV, 2021). The curriculum is the product of work carried out by a group of advisers from the MoE, MoPME and NCTB. Plans to introduce the curriculum in 2021 were hindered due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but a trial run is intended for the start of the new academic year in 2022. Changes will then be implemented in phases starting from 2023. According to the minister, the new structure will support a more seamless transition between the three levels (primary, secondary, higher secondary) of the education system. The NCTB curriculum adviser (I2) interviewed by our project team approved of the measures directed at promoting consistency between stages in the education system:

In the past, primary classes used a competency-based curriculum. That meant that after completing a certain grade students would have to show a series of 'can-dos' before they moved to next grade. That was being assessed in PEC and after completing five years of primary the learners had to show that they have learnt the things mentioned in the curriculum. [However], the secondary education system had an objective-based curriculum. The new curriculum […] is going to be a unified curriculum, which means the whole curriculum will be competency based and will be aligned with each other. This will reduce the gap between the knowledge gained in primary and secondary levels. Previously there was a gap between these two levels, especially the gaps between activities and assessments. That is being addressed this year through the new analysis.

A further stated goal of the new curriculum is to reduce the negative and demotivating impact of examinations on learning. It aims to create a learner-centric education system that helps students enjoy the learning process. Steps will be taken to reduce dependency on memorisation and include methods to enhance deep learning, experiential learning, task-based learning and community engagement (SomoyTV, 2021).

Although details of the reforms are yet to be released, three key areas of policy can be identified: assessment, materials and removal of secondary-level education streams.

1. **Assessment:** the reform project aims to introduce more continuous assessment through in-class assignments and other assessment tools.

2. **Materials:** NCTB books will introduce content for subjects based on a competency-based framework. These changes will be delivered in two stages: for Classes 1, 2, 6 and 7 in 2023 and Classes 3, 4, 8 and 9 in 2024. The SSC examination, which will remain in place, will be designed to reflect these changes from 2026.

3. **Removal of Class 9 and 10 subject streams** (the science, humanities and commerce streams introduced by the 2010 National Curriculum): this will begin at the first year of Higher Secondary School. The change aims to provide time and opportunity for students to decide their career path while maintaining a broader educational focus.

As with the earlier 2010 National Curriculum reforms, these changes are general, curriculum-wide amendments aimed at improving the whole basic education system. Assessing their likely implications for English teaching in particular, the changes seem promising. The policy shift away from public examinations directly addresses the present problem of negative washback observed in this report (see Section 5), where teaching efforts in the final years of secondary school are increasingly narrowed towards the content of a relatively non-communicative examination.

The shift towards continuous assessment offers teachers an opportunity to increase focus on classroom activity aimed at communication, reducing their present (necessary) preoccupation with reading, writing and systems knowledge prioritised in exams. Speaking and listening, key communicative skills ignored by the present public examination system at SSC level, are more likely to be practised. Such improvements do, of course, depend on the teachers who are performing the continuous assessment. Focus group participants interviewed for this report commented that teachers and learners might face difficulties in understanding the new formative assessment procedures and may continue to ignore skills not assessed through final exams. The NCTB interviewee also commented:

[Continuous Assessment was] not part of any public examinations like PEC, JSC or SSC. As a result, neither the students nor the teachers really cared about these skills. Being a country with teaching for testing, it just wouldn't work if it is not part of the public examination system...

Similar concerns were raised concerning changes to NCTB textbooks. Although plans to distribute books have been announced, arrangements for teacher training prior to distribution are not yet clear. Our NCTB expert interviewee said:

One more big problem is implementation; the materials that we are developing need to be implemented by the teachers, and the dissemination training of teaching based on the materials provided has a huge gap.

While our interviewees were largely positive about the changes, most held reservations concerning the practical implementation of the plans. The NCTB interviewee pointed out that many strong initiatives from the earlier National Curriculum 2010 were not fully implemented due to the preparedness of teachers, infrastructures and divergences between opinions and activities of the two key (MoE, MoPME) ministries. Bearing this in mind, this report closes on a positive but cautionary note. Policy makers have clearly identified issues in their education system and issued a programme of ambitious reform. The role of advisers and supporters of these efforts is to support their effectiveness by ensuring that policies are effectively implemented at the classroom level.

7.2 Recommendations for future initiatives

This final section outlines key recommendations based on the findings of our study, to inform future programme implementation and complement the ambitions of the new National Curriculum.

Recognition of the multilingual context is needed to make English learning more inclusive

Measures to develop English language education have been taken in an environment where Bangla is strongly established as a national language. Those seeking to promote English language competence in Bangladesh need to be mindful of English's role in the country's history. Measures such as the 1972 Constitution's establishment of Bangla as the state language and the 1974 Education Commission's centring of Bangla in its education system, represented efforts to promote confident Bangla identity and rid Bangladesh of language policies considered foreign and oppressive. Those seeking to improve English language education must acknowledge the central status of Bangla and not be seen to promote English at its expense. A multilingual approach, acknowledging the value of English but retaining a focus on Bangla and other indigenous languages (Rahman et al., 2019), is one recommended strategy.

Support for teacher recruitment and teacher education systems, including language skills, is critical

An important issue that needs to be addressed in Bangladesh's English education provision is the persistence of shortcomings in its provisions for teacher education. Recent plans (Al Amin and Greenwood, 2018) to implement a nationwide system to standardise procedures for teacher selection and training may remedy some issues. Yet the profession seems to suffer from a lack of status and sense of vocation, with many teachers apparently 'falling

into' the profession, a second choice for those seeking civil service positions (Amin and Greenwood, 2018). Furthermore, many teachers start out their English teaching careers without the opportunity to develop competencies, such as classroom skills and methodological skills, which are shown to be deficient. Issues of differences in teachers' language competence persist.

Sustainability of interventions needs more attention

Several commentators have criticised the system's over-reliance on international teacher education provision. Successes achieved by programmes such as the ELTIP initiative have not compensated for the absence of embedded, systemic national procedures (Rahman and Pandian, 2018b). Bangladesh has not been successful in attaining self-reliance in English language teaching (Sultana, 2018). Those launching new initiatives aimed at developing teacher education may need to consider whether their efforts support the emergence of sustainable, local processes for teacher development.

Approaches to assessment drive classroom practice – more focus on communication is needed

It is very positive that the new National Curriculum framework aims to address the impact that high-stakes public national examinations clearly have on English language learning. Negative washback from the examinations is especially significant during the last two years (Classes 9 and 10) of secondary education, when teaching is oriented increasingly towards the all-important, high-stakes SSC (Secondary School Certificate). Efforts to include at least a listening component in these examinations would have some value in increasing real-world communicative competence, leading to classroom activities and tasks that develop skills actually assessed in public examinations. Additional weighting of marks to further favour continuous assessment would also likely have a beneficial effect, with both teachers and students attending more closely to actual communicative language performance in the classroom.

Teachers need support to more effectively use their textbooks

A real achievement in the development of Bangladesh's education capacity has been the emergence of its independent facility to develop textbooks. However, a challenge – and opportunity – for educators is to further improve content and support for the widely used, state-distributed *English for Today* series. Stronger progression between years could be provided, so that teachers' and learners' sense of advancement is clearer. There is evidence that while many teachers feel happy with the books' content, many are uncertain as to how to use the materials successfully in classrooms.

Clearer, sample tasks for children and teachers might be introduced and a teacher's book provided to support effective teaching.

Good content delivered via a range of technologies could help to improve learning outcomes

There is a mixed picture concerning opportunities for online English language learning delivery in Bangladesh. The country's geography and vulnerability to natural disaster increase the need for online provision, particularly at times of emergency. Television is accessible to around half of the country's households and persists as a relatively accessible medium for distance learning. While levels of access to conventional online technology are still low, mobile phones using 3G or 4G networks are now common. Initiatives aimed at mobilising these old and new technologies will have the advantage of using fairly well-established networks of communication that will reach many Bangladeshis.

Author biographies

Dr Duncan Hunter is a researcher and Programme Director for MA TESOL at the University of Hull, United Kingdom. Duncan worked in a variety of EFL and EAL posts in the UK, Japan and Poland before following an academic career in the fields of Applied Linguistics and TESOL. While lecturing at the Universities of Warwick and St Mark and St John (Marjon) he was involved with a large-scale UK/Malaysian teacher training project involving Malaysian teachers. He has undertaken several projects with the British Council, including a development initiative involving Marjon, the British Council and the Chongqing Educational Board. Duncan is editor of the Key Concepts feature of the *ELT Journal*.

Tasnim Zaman is a Bangladeshi national, who grew up and was educated in Bangladesh. She is an experienced teacher, having worked internationally in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Australia and the UK. Tasnim has worked as a Teacher of Early Years in Bangladesh (2008–12) and then for nine years as a teacher of English for the British Council in Bangladesh and Malaysia. Tasnim's academic outputs have focused on language and pedagogy and include 'the languages spoken by Bangladeshis and the interactions with pedagogy' and 'a case study of practitioner perspectives of teaching reading to second language learners with dyslexia', the latter of which was her master's dissertation. Tasnim speaks Bengali and is fluent in Hindi, Urdu and English, with a working knowledge of Nepali and Bahasa Malayu.

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This report provides an overview of how English language teaching, learning and assessment are currently situated within school-level education in Bangladesh. The report provides up to date contextual information, exploring current policies and practices. The authors draw on policy documentation, research studies and a small number of interviews and focus groups to provide an overall picture of the current scenario. They provide commentary on the status of English within the curriculum, classroom practices, how teachers are supported to develop their skills and knowledge and the opportunities, challenges and future trends that the authors have extrapolated from their research.