

PART IV

Teaching English language versus literature

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GRACE UNDER FIRE

A reflection on the state of English studies in Bangladesh

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Grace under fire

The plight of an English professor in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* resonates with many of our literature professors (Haq, 2001). True to its title, the novel surveys multiple layers of disgrace experienced by Professor Lurie who taught Classics and Modern Languages for 25 years and authored three books on Faust, Eros, and Wordsworth. Once Lurie's original department was shut down 'as part of the great rationalization', he became an adjunct professor of composition at a 'Technical' university (Coetzee, 1999, p. 3). For Lurie, "the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul" (p. 4). The Professor realises that his hitherto believed aesthetic ideas are out of sync with his vocation: "But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days, burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age" (p. 4).

The 'emasculatation' and relegation of Lurie in post-apartheid South Africa runs parallel to the dwindling role of humanities in a neo-liberal milieu. In a spiritual nadir following the world wars, the Arnoldian-Leavisite humanism, which once viewed literature as a pseudo-religion,¹ has started to lose its charm. The supposed 'impracticality' of pursuing English literature is constantly harped on: those who matter react by downsizing the budget for the discipline, and those who hardly matter react by scandalising it. *The Daily Beast's* (2012) ranking of English as seventh among 13 'useless' degrees proffers an example. Low enrolments in English programmes have not helped the cause either; in the United States, admission percentage dropped from 7.6 in 1970 to 3.9 in 2004 (Chace, 2009, p. 32). Concerns over intake have caused many universities to expand the scope of English Studies. On one hand, English departments have refurbished themselves as inter-disciplinary discourses that theorise race, gender, culture, and/or environment; on the other, they have promoted the 'learn-to-earn' model that focuses on language learning and teacher training.

In Bangladesh, the latter gained momentum with the twin pistons of the Private University Act in 1992 and the availability of donor funds. Once Higher Education (HE) became freed of public purse-strings, a new generation of private universities mushroomed where English departments found themselves in a backward-linkage role offering feeder-service to other academic departments. In the last 30 years, the number of public universities has grown from 6 to 41, of which many are technical universities requiring compulsory English courses. In addition, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has approved 103 private universities and 4 international

universities where the medium of instruction is English. The subliminal objectives of these universities, albeit unmentioned in their brochures, are about adding value to their clients than instilling values in their students. The service-provider/client model of teaching highlights employable skills of the ‘student-clients’ as the ultimate objective; the transformative aspect of education in which knowledge is supposed to liberate human minds for physical, moral, and intellectual progress suddenly takes a backseat (Freire, 1972). While traditional syllabi of English Studies still rely on the humanistic outcome, illustrating “how human beings give artistic expression to their experience of the world” (Rosovsky, 1991, p. 116), the growing focus on the communicative aspect of language changes the equation. Since the 1990s, a steady influx of overseas projects and funds boosted the ELT stream (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014), an idea to which I shall return.

The dominant trend in most private universities is to invest in subjects that produce instantly marketable graduates and quantifiable research to improve overall intake, ranking, and accreditation potential. All universities are required to go through compliance and standardisation; the once ‘sage on the stage’, who gave their daily sermons on the greatness of Shakespeare and Milton, are suddenly asked to fill out clerical forms to conform to Bloom’s taxonomy and learning outcomes for the World Bank-funded Quality Assurance Cells. Even public universities, notwithstanding their proclaimed autonomy under the 1973 Education Act, are required to chant the quality mantra and draft outcome-based curricula. Many teachers suddenly find themselves in a Lurie-like situation where they teach no longer out of passion, but out of habit.

Towards the end of the novel, Lurie confronts his former servant Petrus for supposedly stage-managing his daughter’s rape. He ends up cowering before his new land-owner and reflecting on the disgraced English language:

English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed in the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone.

(Coetzee, 1999, p. 117)

A similar nostalgia about the heydays of English still colonises some of us who ruminate about watching Shakespearean plays at the British Council or romancing the lush green lawn of the colonial bungalow that housed the most beautiful and resourceful library on art and literature. We are ‘hurt’ by the UK government’s sudden disinterestedness in the promotion of British culture and its hyper-interest in the marketing of the English language as a product. We feel equally betrayed by our colleagues who have switched sides; before language teaching became fashionable they too were enthused by the wit and diction of the English language. As we hold onto the last garrison of English literature, we get confused by the new vanguards of English language teaching (ELT), who focus mostly on this particular segment of Applied Linguistics and leave the study of pure linguistics (e.g. the study of syntax and semantics) and critical literary analysis in the margin. The critical awareness of literature teachers detects the way the language teachers have fallen prey to the donors’ agenda and expresses concerns over the contributions of the language teachers in the nationwide decline of the standard of English. As part of the UK-sponsored English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), the Government of Bangladesh assigned the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) to develop CLT-oriented textbooks (Ali & Walker, 2014, p. 34). The result is the *English for Today* series for Grades I–XII (nctb.gov.bd). Aimed to enhance communicative competence, communicative language teaching (CLT) emphasises “speaking and listening skills, on writing for specific communicative purposes, and on authentic reading texts” (Brown, 1993, p. 226). NCTB’s (1996, p. 136) bold claim that the shift from hitherto practised Grammar

Translation Method (GTM) to CLT would teach English “as something to be used, rather than as something to be talked about”, soon proved empty. Most high school graduates are entering universities without the necessary linguistic competency, creating special needs for remedial courses.

For English departments, the problem is even more nuanced. Gayatri Spivak’s (2012) insight is useful:

What is the basic difference between teaching a second language as an instrument of communication and teaching the same language so that the student can appreciate literature?. ... There is a certain difference in orientation between the language classroom and the literature classroom. In the former, the goal is an active and reflexive use of the mechanics of the language. In the latter, the goal is at least to shape the mind of the student so that it can resemble the mind of the so-called implied reader of the literary text, even when that is a historically distanced cultural fiction. (p. 36)

Indeed, how do we train students to become ‘implied readers’ when they are not even ready to become basic readers? And then, we expect these students to acquire teachers’ training tools at an undergraduate level? The role of the English departments in Bangladesh is far from clear. The situation has been aggravated by the lack of vision and guidance of the policy-makers and jingoist-ideologues whose populist nationalism does not allow them to encourage language immersion. While everyone recognises the ‘international’ needs for learning English, nobody dares to scratch the ‘national wounds’ – a source of pride involving the language martyrs who died defending the mother tongue Bangla in 1952 when the Pakistani rulers tried to impose Urdu as a State language. Bangla is a sensitive issue, and the ‘English Question’ is fraught with, to borrow Kachru’s (1997) observation about India, an agonising ‘schizophrenia’ (p. 100).

The English departments are facing challenges from both within and outside, but the case is far from curious. William Chace (2009) highlights the friction in the American context, which is equally true for us. He thinks that English professors are in denial about their marginalisation in academia, instigating many ‘self-centred’ drifts:

Amid a chaos of curricular change, requirements dropped and added, new areas of study in competition with older ones, and a variety of critical approaches jostling against each other, many faculty members, instead of reconciling their differences and finding solid ground on which to stand together, have gone their separate ways. As they have departed, they have left behind disorder in their academic discipline, (p. 38)

The present chapter, thus, attempts to explain the chaos that plagues English departments in Bangladesh. It explores the pandemonium caused by dissident voices to argue that our ‘infighting’ is leaving us unprepared for new threats against Humanities. The exponential growth in technology, dubbed as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), poses new challenges. Any discussion on the future of English Studies must go beyond the rift between the literary and the literacy camps, and turn the challenge into an opportunity. Let me unpack these issues from a personal perspective. I shall begin by pointing out the paradigm shift in literary studies.

The times they are a-changin’²

In 2016, the Swedish Academy shocked the world by awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to rock-singer Bob Dylan “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” (nobelprize.org). The radical announcement surprised even the recipient who

delayed the award acknowledgement by six months, and began his acceptance speech wondering how his songs were related to literature. He recalled the long list of literary texts that he had read at Grammar School that taught him the power of storytelling and inculcated ‘principles and sensibilities and an informed view of the world’ (nobelprize.org). Dylan hesitated to rank himself among the greats, but he identified his authorial power in his musicality that needed to be heard.

The award heralds a changing time and a recognition of popular culture as literature. Even though Bob Dylan anchored himself in the canonical tradition, many saw the endorsement as a sharp break from Nobel’s grand tradition. My department organised a debate to weigh the merits of the Nobel Prize by asking some fundamental questions: What is literature? What does literature do? What do we do with literature? We used the occasion to demonstrate English departments’ engagement with current issues, without resorting to formulaic calculus or business models. As an organiser, it was a personal vindication, my response to the university authority’s boastful claim that the business school was bringing the dough, while the humanities were enjoying the pizza-toppings.

Things were not as difficult 30 years ago when I attended a public university. I got admitted to the English department knowing its degree was ‘good’. There was no brochure to clarify the mission/vision of the department. The ‘goodness’ of the subject was confirmed by the successful English graduates working as government ministers, corporate bosses, diplomats, bankers, teachers, newspaper editors, or NGO leaders. Traditionally, English graduates are among the most successful candidates in the highly competitive civil-service examinations. A quick glance at the academic background of the officers from the administration cadre of a particular batch will illustrate the case: 47 out of 250 officers had their first degrees in English (18.8%), followed by Sociology (6.4%), Economics (5.6%), Law (4.8%), and International Relations (4.4%) (A Souvenir of Bangladesh Civil Service Officers, 27th Batch).

Unfortunately, there is no formal mapping between the English degree and the job market. The shortage of English teachers, however, periodically haunts the media. Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (2008) reports:

Only around 12% of the English teachers received basic subject in-service training for more than 1 month. Around 37% English teachers received in-service training for 1 month and lesser period. 25% of them received training for 15 days and less. It is evident that the in-service training for the English teachers is quite inadequate to make them conversant on the subject. 63.98% of the respondent English teachers completed degree with only 100 marks in English and only 9.20% of them passed degree with 300 marks in English. 26.82% of the English teachers did not have English at their degree levels. (Study on Qualification and Training)

The appalling figures presented above may prove our debate between literature and language as fanciful as most schoolteachers did not even attend universities; some completed the two-year graduation with one compulsory English course. Yet we expect them to use CLT, a model that requires language immersion and cultural sensitivity. The bigger question remains: Why are our graduates not teaching at schools? An educated guess is – money. A schoolteacher’s salary is so paltry that it does not attract any graduate who has invested so much in HE. Recently, the High Court ordered the government to give the 10th-grade basic salary-scale (Tk. 16,000, equivalent to \$200) per month to primary school headmasters instead of the existing Tk. 12,000 (\$150) (The Daily Star, 25 February 2019). No wonder, the graduates are drawn to jobs where their disciplinary knowledge is hardly relevant.

The conference proceedings of ‘English Studies and the Marketplace’ observe the following:

English Studies has found itself precariously poised between the values it has traditionally transmitted to its graduates and the instrumental demands of the marketplace. There is friction between ... the humanistic outlook that it has cultivated for generations now, and ... the dictates of the job market and the relentless pressure exerted by forces of capitalism on the education sector.

(Alam, Haque, & Ahmed, 2018, p. iii)

I find this left-leaning academic criticism at odds with our adopted learning objectives. Are not we constantly reminded by the status quo to prepare our students to acquire skills so that they can serve the capitalist machinery? It appears that our convoluted convictions as educators often do our students a disservice. It is important to ensure that our students receive what we promise. If we promise that we will provide them critical thinking abilities with an additional critical reading and writing skills, we should deliver that. If we identify lifelong learning as the main objective of HE, we should work towards attaining that. If we want them to have a 360-degree knowledge imbued with open mindedness and empathy, if we want them to have communicative skills with cultural sensitivity, then we should design our syllabi accordingly. The texts need not be restricted to the Anglophone world; they can come from different contexts and origins. They can make us aware of both World Englishes and World literature. But the problem arises when we try to impart HE at a level for which our incoming students are far from ready. This issue dates back to the country’s first university that offered a degree in English. The University of Dhaka (DU) faced similar problems during its inception in 1921, and we have not found a solution in the last 100 years. The ‘divide and rule’ policy of the British Raj that informed the foundation of the university has morphed into the division bells that ring inside the English departments today.

Dhaka University: The ground zero of English studies in Bangladesh

DU is the first university in the country to offer a degree in English. The English department, headed by the famous grammarian C. L. Wren, was one of the 12 departments with which the University started. Teaching was modelled after the Oxford tutorial system, and faculty recruitment was done through *Times Educational Supplement*. As in other parts of the British Empire, the colonial design of the university was to create a civil society to support the State-machinery (Viswanathan, 1989). Ironically, it was the British-trained educated middle class that turned against their masters. The British eventually left the subcontinent not before throwing one final punch: the Partition.

The religion-based partition between India and Pakistan in 1947 caused a mass exodus, and atrophied an intellectual vacuum in DU as most Hindu teachers had to migrate. ‘The acute staffing problem’ was highlighted by a maverick female professor from Australia, who joined DU in a nascent country that was reeling from the Partition pangs. A.G. Stock’s *Memoirs of Dacca University 1947–1951* (2017) is a wonderful account not only of her stint in Dhaka during the East Pakistan period but also of her minute observations on the ‘English question’ that troubles us till today. The sudden evacuation of efficient teachers from the system coupled with the political gesture of spreading HE and making it accessible to a vast number of students made DU compromise its quality. And the downward trend has continued.

Soon after the Partition, all colleges offering Intermediate (i.e. higher secondary), B.A., and B.Sc. courses in East Pakistan were annexed with DU (Stock, 2017, p. 59) as Calcutta University

became inaccessible. The University was given the impossible job of dealing with both incumbent and incoming students, most of whom have little or no exposure to everyday English. During the British period, even small town schools and colleges had some native speaking (mostly missionaries) schoolteachers. With the spread of education, English reached areas “where outside the classroom English was never heard and rarely seen in print” (Stock, 2017, p. 62). Stock touts the Intermediate system as a sheer joke. She writes: “In effect, we were taking ten thousand men and women, the most promising brains of their generation, through two years’ intensive training in saying not what they honestly thought but what they believed someone more powerful wished them to say” (p. 69).

In the absence of the ‘symbolic capital’, students resorted to a culture of rote-learning and rehearsed what others had said. Stock (2017, p. 144) wryly observes that all learning has been ‘marks driven’ as there were too many people applying for too few jobs. The consequence of such a competitive scenario led to two ancillary cultures: ‘Culture of transmission’ encourages a learner to maintain obligations and proprieties to such an extent that the elements of choice become minimum. ‘Culture of initiative’ involves a surrender to authority; “The young man, who in every context he understood, from the choice of a wife to the interpretation of an ancient text, knew that the right judgments were those of the right authorities” (Stock, 2017, p. 144).

What good is literature then if it does not unsettle the culture of submission? Stock (2017, p. 147) has a stock answer: “In Bengal students came to English literature with a much more intense awareness of their own literature ... they might not write good English, but they could carry over ideas from the English class into Bengali”. She thus foreshadows the debate on the fallacy of mono-lingualism: “Monolingual instruction creates a false impression that students who are better at English are better students, which is not the case” (Rafi, 2019, n.p.). Stock praises her students’ ability to relate to the essential human component of literature. These are the same students who resisted the encroachment of Urdu as a State language but recognised the worthiness of English literature. In the creative minds of the English students, “enrichment of the literature was an enrichment of the national life” (Stock, 2017, p. 148). No wonder, some of the prominent Bengali writers have been students of the English Departments: Buddhadeva Bose, Munier Chowdhury, Syed Ali Ahsan, Shamsur Rahman, and Syed Shamsul Haq to name a few.

A historical analogue of the situation can be found in the pre-Partition Bengal renaissance. Postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, traced the link between literature and the politics of identity in British Bengal. He argued that at the height of the anticolonial nationalism in Bengal, a certain romantic mood prevailed among the educated middle class that “perceived [a] connection between identity and aesthetic activity in the realms of art, music, literature and language” (Chakrabarty, 2004, p. 658). Chakrabarty illustrated his point by highlighting the prominent Bangla scholar Dinesh Sen as a product of the English department. Sen searched “for the roots of the distinctiveness and for pride in the Bengali way of life” (p. 660), and English Studies offered him “spiritual solutions to what ailed the spirit of the English-educated, romantic Bengali man” (pp. 666–667).

Stock detected a similar soul-searching in her students who later got involved in the political dream of creating an independent country. Writing about the anti-British sentiment, Chakrabarty (2004), however downplays the political aspect of literature. For him, nation-building involves the social structure, and ‘literary spirit’ is not enough to change the social dynamics. He posits, “One could politicize literature, distinguish political from so-called nonpolitical literature, or read literature politically in the interest of social science” (p. 669). Hence, the literary fort receives yet another assault in which its power to wield political will is disabled. English departments are no strangers to such disciplinary politics. In a newly established Bangladesh, therefore, English

became not only a subject of politics but also was subjected to politics. The greatest of which involves the question of national language.

Bangla matters

Once Bangladesh earned her freedom in 1971, Bangla mattered the most. The country was named Bangladesh – the land where Bangla is spoken. The first constitution privileged Bangla as the national language. Ironically, a country, whose pursuit of a separate nation-state was tied to linguistic injustice, gave Bangla a hegemonic status to subsume other languages, including those of the ethnic minority groups (Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 30). English was the first to be guillotined. During the Pakistan regime, English was the de facto second language for official correspondence between the west and the east wings. In Bangladesh, the nationalistic zeal got English decommissioned as a foreign language. The first Bangladesh Education Commission in 1974 ascribed English as a foreign language and recommended teaching the language from Class 6. The Taskforce in 1976 relaxed it slightly stating that English could be taught either in Class 3 or in Class 6, *subject to the availability of teachers* (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, p. 10). The conditional clause underlined here indicates the lack of infrastructure in a war-ravaged country.

The demand for Bangla in all spheres marginalised the English-medium schools, attended mostly by the upper middle class. English was deemed as elitist and frowned upon in a country that had socialism as a founding principle. The necessity of English was felt once the labour market opened up for Bangladeshi migrant workers in the 1980s. However, the absence of national patronage dented the standard of English, pointed out by many government reports. The successive military governments did not want to open the language can-of-worms, allowing the situation to deteriorate further. In one populist move, General Ershad withdrew the compulsory English paper from the degree examination. This appealed to the rural students who supposedly had no utility of English in their everyday-life or workplace, and considered passing the subject as their biggest exam hurdle. After President Ershad was deposed, the new democratic government in 1991 made English a compulsory subject from Class 1. The development partners worked in tandem with the Ministry of Education to conduct various needs analysis. By 2000, English-medium schools received official recognition. The National Education Policy, 2000 underscored the need for English as medium of instruction at the tertiary level (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, p. 10).

Soon after, access to English education increased manifold, and the country became a huge market for English “with over 30 million students learning English as a compulsory subject from Grade 1 in the different streams of pre-tertiary education, Bangladesh has one of the largest English learning populations in the world” (Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 32). However, the quantity belies the quality. Most of the students in the Bangla-medium schools or Madrasa Boards follow the textbooks prepared by the NCTB and are taught by teachers with inadequate training and proficiency. The English-medium schools, in contrast, follow the Cambridge or IB (International Baccalaureate) curricula. Given the relatively privileged urban background, the students have more access to the use of English in social settings. With little or no encouragement, the proficiency level among the Madrasa students is the most disappointing. Many students of English-medium schools have been high performers in their O’ and A’ level exams; for example, a total of 48 students earned the prestigious ‘Top in the World’ awards from Cambridge Assessment International Education for their exceptional performances in June 2018 (*Dhaka Tribune*, 8 December 2018). However, English-medium schools are located mostly in the capital with few others in Chittagong, Sylhet, and Narayanganj, and the quality of these schools remains questionable to say the least.³

As for the mainstream Bangla-medium system, a DFID (Department for International Development) funded English in Action (EIA) baseline survey (2009) failed to find any noticeable proof of English language progression through primary and secondary school as the majority of students remained at the most basic ability levels year after year (in Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 33). The situation is even worse in rural areas when many teachers are “teaching students at higher levels than their own ability in the language”. In fact, “not a single Grade 10 student in a cohort of 14 students interviewed was able to introduce themselves properly after 10 years of study of English” (Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 33).

Learning a foreign language is a complex issue involving multiple stakeholders, including the government. Without a consistent education policy, the overall standard of English cannot be improved. Chowdhury and Kabir (2014) have aptly maintained that the “‘friction between Bengali and English’ had been detrimental to English teaching and learning” (p. 2). The spread of English in an interlinked world is inevitable. It is the government’s duty to ensure educational, economic, cultural, and political equity to address the educational challenges (teachers’ training, national curriculum, testing, learning environment) and to identify the learners’ needs before drafting a comprehensive policy that takes socio-economic, political, educational, and linguistic contexts into cognizance (Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 2).

Conversely, we also need to understand that a language policy is a social construct with political implications. The policy is tied with the government’s larger political, linguistic, and socio-economic agenda (Kirkpatrick, 2016). The country has undergone many political changeovers in the last 50 years. Each government has its own priorities and agenda. A total of seven education policies have been adopted by different governments, each reflecting its own interest (Chowdhury, 2018, p. 4). Indeed, “the political turmoil of the mid-1970s, followed by the military coup of 1981 and a number of years of political repression, martial law, suppression of democracy, political volatility and stagnancy, have marked frustrating disjuncture in any attempt to produce a coherent, consistent and time-sensitive English language policy” (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, p. 3). The current political stability and steady growth of national GDP allow the government an opportunity to adopt a policy that will aid the country’s vision of becoming a middle-income economy.

The success stories of some private English-medium schools suggest that there is a direct connection between the resources available for learning and the learning outcome of a student. In absence of a coherent language policy and the mechanism to implement, the Bangla-medium and Madrasa students are failing to acquire similar efficiency. The inefficiency of the public schooling system is hurting HE and, by extension, the country’s economy. Most of our mainstream students enter the university without the necessary linguistic competency. They cannot read the texts, understand the class lectures in English, or express their ideas in written and oral modes. One research finds that the language skill level of our high school graduates who come to the university is equivalent to the Class 7 level (Imam, 2005). I know of a visiting language fellow at a private university who paired up first semester local students with Grade 4 students in the United States for correspondence practice, claiming that both groups had similar linguistic competency.

In 2014, the quality of English became national news when only 2 out of 1364 applicants got the required marks to study English at DU. In the same year, 66% of students passed HSC with GPA 5 – suggesting top scores even in English. The admission fiasco caused a huge uproar. The education minister lashed out saying that DU was trying to tarnish the government’s image (*The Daily Star*, 30 September 2014). Many critiqued the English department for setting very difficult questions. One question-setter, Prof. Fakrul Alam, counter-argued that the questions were at par with the standard expected of freshmen (in Chowdhury, Sarkar, Mojumder, & Roshid, 2018,

p. 243). The fiasco highlights two distinct issues: English departments are becoming alienated from the lived reality and our schooling system is failing to make the students university-ready.

To help the students ease into the tertiary system, most private universities offer some foundation courses on basic English. The government, through UGC, insists on having these mandatory English courses. Mostly, young teachers, who have just graduated and are looking for opportunities to go abroad for higher studies, teach these courses and their choice of higher studies is ultimately linked with these courses and the availability of funds. In absence of proper training and pedagogical orientation, these teachers fail to deliver and make any significant change in freshman students. Many of these teachers have an ad hoc attitude towards teaching as they prepare for going abroad. Depending on the research or funding scope, these teachers switch their orientation. In many cases, literature teachers end up pursuing research in relatively new programmes which will have no implication on the courses they will be teaching back home. Similarly, many language teachers end up doing research in pioneering fields that have little application in the country's context. A mismatch between what a teacher teaches and what she or he has an advanced degree on prevails. The English departments in Bangladesh suffer from this academic mismatch, and the clarity of purpose ultimately affects the academia. This confusion is often evident in a disciplinary mimicry in which our English departments want to incorporate recent trends without actually being ready for them. To give the devil its due, this is a worldwide phenomenon that has dented the reputation of English Studies.

'Zero at the bone'⁴

Marjorie Perloff (2011, p. 161) is one of the fiercest critics of "the political, cultural, economic, postcolonial, and race-and-gender-studies mill" that English departments have become. She used the program objectives of the University of South California to detail how her colleagues' recent scholarship and research are far removed from the undergraduate teaching that is mostly done by teaching assistants and adjuncts (Perloff, 2011). Elsewhere, Perloff accused many of her colleagues for producing scholarship without necessary credentials, making them susceptible to criticism. "Whereas economists or physicists, geologists or climatologists, physicians or lawyers must master a body of knowledge before they can even think of being licensed to practice", she said, "we literary scholars, it is tacitly assumed, have no definable expertise" (cited in Chace, 2009, p. 38).

Chace (2009) quotes Perloff to pronounce the death of a discipline. He, however, thinks that the inflow of immigrant student population is changing the university landscape in the United States, warranting a new kind of scholarship. Composition studies can offer the dying discipline a lifeline (p. 37). This idea is fast gaining currency. Patricia Bizell (1994) noticed it while attending the 1987 MLA conference 'What is English?' where Peter Elbow claimed a 'remarkable consensus' on 'the central business of English Studies' (p. 164). Elbow's 'prescription' for the English departments includes:

Using language actively in a diversity of ways and settings – that is, not only classroom as exercises for teachers but in a range of social settings...Reflecting on language use. Turning back and self-consciously reflecting on how one has been using language – examining these processes of talking, listening, and reading. ...Trying to ensure that this using and reflecting go on in conditions of both nourishment and challenge, that is, conditions where teachers care about students themselves and what they actively learn – not just about skills or scores or grades.

(Bizell, 1994, p. 164)

Elbow also believed that literature offers authentic reading materials. In *Write with Elbow*, he adds, “You can’t make meaning unless you are writing or reading about something; practices are always practices of a content” (Bizell, 1994, p. 166). In the ESL (English as a second language) context, especially when it refers to the role of literature in language learning, the focus has been on the ‘use’ rather than on the ‘study’ of literature. Literary texts are used as materials for learning the language components. These are the debates that form the very basis of Composition Studies, especially in the United States, which are being imported to our eco-system. For instance, Shamsuzzaman (2017) maintains that “examining literary language has limited usefulness for writing, because students do not write literature; they write about it or respond to it. This dis-juncture between reading and writing compounds further when students discover that they read discourse in aesthetic genre, but they are required to write in critical genre” (p. 38).

Shamsuzzaman (2017) seems convinced that what Composition Studies has done in the United States can be replicated by the ELT programmes in Bangladesh. In a previous article he claimed that “English literature in Bangladesh seems to have been relinquishing its influence because of the emergence of ELT” (p. 40). His 2017 article offers a mediatory stance suggesting an increased segment of composition in the English syllabi. Shamsuzzaman concedes, “When English literature loses steam in Bangladesh, Composition gains no ground”, asserting that ‘Literature, after all, is composition’ (p. 40).

These arguments suggest a large-scale trivialisation of what we do in the English departments. As a Lurie-like professor, these proposed repackaging of English studies sends a chill down the spine. I can very well visualise my senior colleagues in the English departments returning from their existential lectures on T.S. Eliot’s ‘Hollow Man’ to retire in the faculty lounge to have their toast and tea, only to have a rude awakening to ‘the narrow fellow in the grass’ that made them feel ‘zero at the bone’. Our old-school teachers are waking up to a new reality, and they react to see a rebranded EIA.

English in (re)action

As a Commonwealth country, the United Kingdom has been the study-destination for many Bangladeshi scholars. It is usually the scholarships administered by the overseas cultural front-offices such as the British Council (BC) or the American Centre that created this institutionalised cultural capital of our English professors.

Established in the 1950s in a plot of land given to them by DU, the BC has been the hotbed of many intellectual and cultural events. The policy of the Council to foster British culture changed once Margaret Thatcher came to power. Under her neo-liberal policy, Arts Council was forced to withdraw many of its cultural facets. Roger Bowers, a BC senior officer, has no inhibition in saying, “we have ... a vested interest in maintaining the roles of English as a language, and of British ELT as a trade and a profession” (Kachru, 1976, p. 100).

In *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson (1992) cites a similar claim by another BC director: “Our language is our greatest asset, greater than North Sea Oil, and the supply is inexhaustible; furthermore, while we do not have a monopoly, our particular brand remains highly sought after ... those who guide the fortunes of this country share my conviction in the need to invest in, and exploit to the full, this invisible, God-given asset” (pp. 144–145).

Accordingly, the UK government has made some ‘strategic investments’ worldwide (Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 4). DFID’s 50-million-pound aid under EIA is no coincidence. The supply of fund turned our ELT teachers and students into ‘warriors coming out of sown dragon teeth’ in Greek mythology. The project involving Open University (UK) and BBC intended to empower 30 million people with English in 9 years. EIA website claimed reaching 44 million users through

BBC Janala. Mobile phones were used to help 25 million Bangladeshis to ‘improve their English as a route into work and out of poverty’ (www.eiabd.com). With the abundance of so many open learning sources, one wonders, why would the government employ overseas experts spending 50 million GBP to promote everyday English? The suspicion prompts Fakrul Alam to label this venture as new-imperialism and admonish BC for being a surrogate East India Company (Chowdhury et al., 2018, p. 248).

A cursory look at the BC, Dhaka, website confirms Alam’s allegation. The landing page offers a collage of ads for language teaching, testing, training, certification, and products. The needle of BC’s agenda – the exchange of ‘friendly knowledge’ between the countries – is lost in the ‘for sale’ haystack (britishcouncil.org). Evidently, the ‘strategic investments’ are yielding dividends. BC administers IELTS exams for overseas studies or immigration; offers corporate staff training; and monitors test centres for all Cambridge exams. But is it legal for foreign envoys to run businesses? Surely, our bilateral relationship with the United Kingdom must allow our High Commission in London to run similar language programmes in Bangla? That would be one way to export manpower abroad and create a market for standard Bangla. The web fine print, however, make these actions legitimate as BC wishes: “to develop English language skills through direct teaching, digital products, administering exams, and developing teachers of English” (britishcouncil.org.bd).

In paper, BC acts as a development partner to assist the Ministry of Education in its ‘secondary school reform’ plan. EIA is one project that required many native Man-Fridays, creating a need for local ELT experts. The rehashing of the textbooks bulldozed all literary pieces and introduced conversational passages. Grammar items taught under the GTM were abandoned to focus on applied language usage. The search for contemporary authentic texts turned NCTB textbooks into a patchwork of newspaper articles and web-pieces. In my view, some literary pieces in English for Today (XI and XII) textbook in 2015 were half-heartedly done. The textbook breaks away from its previous series and exists in isolation failing to give students enough contextual support. The literary pieces appeared to have irked the CLT camp. While literature professors struggle to dumb down ‘No fear Shakespeare’ in their classrooms, ELT teachers start brandishing ‘Who needs Shakespeare?’ The chasm between the language and literature teachers widens.⁵

True, the funds from donor agencies have given confidence to many non-native users. But the funds were not enough to sustain the learning process of learners, and whatever little success EIA achieved perished soon after. The only way English-learning programmes can be sustainable is through involving all stakeholders. Long-term dependency on overseas funds can never serve the national interest. The scanty investments in education (in the 2% national budget range) can never create a congenial learning environment. Without the investment, teachers will not receive the payment they deserve, and without a clear policy on the English question, we will never have the right teaching content and approaches. The government must realise that there is a direct link between teachers’ skills and students’ learning. It will be false to assume that all English graduates will end up as language teachers in the primary and secondary system. As educators, we also need to ascertain the right balance between language and literature components in our English syllabi.

The friction between literary and literacy, between knowledge and skills, is both real and manufactured. We are dealing with these issues because we have to deal with the by-products of a faulty schooling system. At the tertiary level, we can always blame the supply chain, while the job market acts as quality-check outlets to blame us for producing faulty products. English departments cannot think that they exist in a vacuum. The encroachment of 4IR poses a new challenge. The exponential growth in technology creates a new reality that requires realignment of the language/literature question so that we are equipped for the future.

Digitisation: A saving grace

Let us then return to the basic question: why study English? There is a universal and a local answer. The colonial gift of enlightenment philosophy has finished its shelf-life. In a postmodern, post-truth milieu, 'being human' is bad Public Relations campaign. English departments cannot claim to be the sole agency for everything that is human. The Venn diagram of English Studies includes many specialised fields such as economics, social-sciences, physics, biology, and theology. As Perloff cautioned, we must make our scholarships and their articulation credible. Language is our tool, and a good manager does not quarrel with his tools. The 4IR offers English Studies an opportunity to expand and make itself useful. For the IT-driven artificial intelligence-oriented future, a combination of science and humanities is required. 4IR is sure to change the ecology of HE. The Dean of Boston University, Frederick S. Pardee, tells us, "Learners of all ages must meet the challenges of the automation economy with creativity and curiosity. At the policy level [we must] adjust the learning environment in preparation for the future" (Gleason, 2018, p. viii).

This is a clarion call for English as a branch of liberal arts. The inventor of Apple, Steve Jobs, reiterated it shortly before his death in 2011, "It is in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough. It [is] technology married with Liberal Arts, married with the Humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing" (Gleason, 2018, p. 23).

This expansion of 4IR offers us an opportunity to broaden the scope of English Studies in Bangladesh. Literature courses, as exponents of liberal arts, can make us alive to these changes. Language courses, however, can incorporate multi-modal and discourse analysis as part of the curricula to appreciate digital humanities. To give our students more familiar handles, more culturally rooted texts and methods need to be included so that our students learn to identify local contextual equivalence of the texts that they are dealing with. The main challenge is to find local relevance for the Anglophone texts that dominate our curricula. Translation studies, creative writing, digital media, and pedagogy are some of the avenues which can help English Studies reshape itself. Those interested in teaching must go to appropriate pedagogical training institutes.

In Bangladesh, we need an education policy with a holistic approach. Preparing a generation with small talk as was done under EIA may give them menial jobs, but not the symbolic or cultural capital required to thrive in a fast-changing world. Our only saving grace can come through dissolving our differences by constantly listening to our stakeholders – students, guardians, and employers – before making ourselves heard before the government. The future is a serious matter, and it cannot be left to either the donors or the myopic policy-makers.

Notes

- 1 "England is sick, and ... English literature must save it. The Churches having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, to delight and instruct us, but also, to save our souls and heal the State" (Eagleton, 2003, p. 20).
- 2 From the title of a Bob Dylan song.
- 3 Based on comments made by participants of three streams of education who took part in FGDs on 'Evaluating English Language Teaching and Learning in Bangladesh'. Mortuza, Khan, Yasmin, and Rahman (2018).
- 4 From Emily Dickinson's poem 'A Narrow Fellow in the Grass'.
- 5 See Fakrul Alam's "Revisioning English Studies in Bangladesh in the Age of Globalisation and ELT" in Chowdhury et al. (2018). Also, see the study on the 'organised hypocrisy' in EIA programme by a group of Malaysian scholars. The research shows the lack of commitment, efficiency, and transparency which affected the desired outcome of the project (Karim, Mohamed, Ismail, & Rahman, 2018).

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