
ESL Learning in the Public ECE Sector of Dhaka and Kolkata

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss the need for research in the field of ESL learning as a stand-alone area. What can be achieved by working in this area? Its implications for the field of Applied Linguistics, and who would it benefit, is discussed in detail. It has been explored using qualitative methodology that confusion still persists regarding difference between teaching, learning and acquisition, even among teachers. Even after the emergence of Educational Linguistics, within the wider realm of Applied Linguistics, where teaching and learning ought to receive equal importance, learning is still not given proper attention. Language and education planning and policymaking prioritize the needs of the education system and its deliverables rather than the needs of an efficient learning environment. The whole study is based on a comparative case study design. Respondents were found still unable to distinctively explain teaching, learning, acquisition and education in Dhaka and Kolkata. Dhaka is the national capital of Bangladesh. Kolkata is an Indian city and the capital of West Bengal State. In this article the reader will be able to explore why ESL learning in the early childhood period should be taken more seriously as a stand-alone area of research, especially where English is taught as a second language, like in Dhaka and Kolkata. Pupils of Dhaka and Kolkata both share a common first language that is Bengali, which they start learning together with English. Data from both the cities were collected and analysed at the same time.

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Applied Linguistics’ was first used in the “Journal of Language Learning: A Quarterly Journal of Applied Linguistics” in 1948 (Alduais, 2012:206). Applied linguistics slowly tried to establish itself as a separate discipline after differentiating its approach from the viewpoint of general or theoretical linguistics from 1950. This separation was mainly initiated by the American linguists like Leonard Bloomfield, Charles C. Fries and Robert Lado. Recent understanding of the scenario points out that the American linguists did not really want to create a new discipline. They wanted general or theoretical linguistics to expand its horizons by getting out of the library and providing “real world” linguistic solutions. The American linguists focused on learning strategies,

their challenges and limitations but from a teacher's perspective. They came up with solutions for the teachers and did not assert on 'learning' to be an independent aspect of studies regarding language usage as compared to 'teaching' (Davies & Elder, 2004:2-3). Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language (TESOL) came into being after the second world war when 'teaching' took precedence over other rudiments of applied language studies. 'Learning' became secondary as TESOL in a unidimensional manner tried to categorise and vigorously enhance the theories of English teaching through practice. The UK and the USA were the premier destinations to endorse TESOL (Wu, Qiu, Hutagalung & McNeill-Keay, 2020:568).

'Educational Linguistics' was born when Bernard Spolsky defined it for the first time in 1972 at the Third Conference on Applied Linguistics, held in Denmark's capital Copenhagen. Its inception was largely due to the rising dissatisfaction among linguists like Spolsky due to the ever-widening scope of Applied Linguistics. It was largely believed Applied Linguistics heavily focussed on application of theories of general linguistics in merely foreign language teaching. Other aspects of language education which included language education policy, structures of language education authorities, learning environments etc., which bordered with other social scientific fields like sociology and psychology were largely ignored. Spolsky wanted 'Educational Linguistics' to investigate the relationship between language teaching and second language acquisition in relation to other sub-fields of linguistics and other fields of social science (Fang, 2023:132-134). After revision of his original model, Spolsky proposed the extension of Applied Linguistics' periphery beyond language teaching to learning theory and pedagogy as well (Alduais, 2012:211). When the study of 'Educational Linguistics' began in Asia, especially in China in the 1990s, it was mainly perceived as a sub-field of 'Applied Linguistics' dealing merely with language teaching (Fang, 2023:135).

From under the umbrella of wider social planning and policy, language planning and policy became a vital part of 'Applied Linguistics'. Legislatures adopt a language policy influenced by the representatives' political and socio-economic ideologies, like declaring a language as the official language of the state or providing free schooling, study materials etc., to pupils of a particular speech community respectively (Ikemefuna, 2015:6). Historically, there has been a prolonged dispute regarding the relationship between language policy and language planning, which has even affected how a language should be taught, learnt or included in an education system. A camp of linguists including Cooper, Schiffman, Kaplan and Baldauf thought that language policy is about setting an aim and choosing the objectives as per the aim. Planning, according to them, is about putting the necessary action in order to achieve the objectives. The second camp containing linguists like Fishman, Jernudd, Rubin and Das Gupta thought policy is just a part of planning. They rejected the notion of separation of policy from planning completely (Zaidi, 2013:n.p.).

There are three types of language planning: corpus planning, status planning and acquisition or language-in-education planning. Corpus planning deals with development and fixation of grammatical rules of a particular language. Status or prestige planning determines the social status of a language (where and how a language should be used in a social hierarchy) and acquisition or language-in-education planning deals with the production of language learning materials and development of linguistic competence (Goundar, 2017:81). Moreover, Meiringer (2009:14-15) in her thesis points out six different aspects of acquisition or language-in-education planning:

- (i) Access policy deals with the penetration of a language through education. At this stage it is decided who studies what language, at what level and when. For example, in some institutions there are strict entry measures put in place to get access to English or any other European language courses. The same measures are not put in place for all Indian vernaculars or classical languages. Learners for some vernacular and classical languages only need to sit for entry examinations for higher or research degrees. Whereas, in some private schools even early-childhood learners need to appear for interviews with their parents for admission.

- (ii) Personnel policy deals with the recruitment and management of language teachers and education administrators for the swift and accurate delivery of language education-related services.
- (iii) Curriculum and community policy deals with the decision-making process of what should be taught and how should it be taught and to whom.
- (iv) Methods and material policy is very closely related to the previous aspect of curriculum and community policy. It deals with the preparation of appropriate materials and deciding on the methods through which language education-related services are delivered.
- (v) Resource policy deals with the overall infrastructure required for a smooth and positive learning environment.
- (vi) Evaluation policy deals with the evaluation of the overall state of education as per the goals and objectives of education framework set by the policy-makers.

Thus, it can be logically concluded that language planning and policy directly affects language learners' learning. Unfortunately, a policy is often judged based on its influence on teaching practices and the overall education system, completely overlooking the prevalent learning practices and environments. For example, the policy of English language education, as introduced by Thomas Babington Macaulay during the British rule in India, when Dhaka and Kolkata both were situated in the province of undivided Bengal, posited the idea of 'downward filtration' theory. As per the theory, only a handful of Indians were to be taught English and those Indians in return would serve as the communicators between the British rulers and the common masses. The effectivity of the policy was not evaluated on how efficiently the wider masses were able to learn, understand and use English (Meiringer, 2009:25-26). After long discussions, the English education policy was slightly modified in mid-1800s, keeping who needs to be taught English, where and when, at the centre of discussions by Sir Charles Woods. English education was made compulsory in higher education and the primary education's curriculum was designed on the basis of vernacular or regional languages. Meeting the language learners' needs, especially those studying in the primary grades, for the wider acceptance and propagation of English language was completely ignored (Sarkar, 2021:78).

After the partition of India, and the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan, Kolkata remained as a part of Indian territory and Dhaka became the national capital of Bangladesh. English was banned in both the cities within the periphery of formal early childhood education sector (ECE) (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014:1; Chattopadhyay, 2014:133). Serious skirmishes since 1971 between religious and secular groups have been witnessed in Dhaka. Those struggles have continued over the English language, which was not perceived as an ethical mode of communication. English was positioned by socio-political forces as a threat to the cultural identity (Haque, 2009:130). In the meantime, those skirmishes led to multiple obstacles in the field of formal ESL learning within and outside Dhaka. After critical analysis of scopes for the socio-economic development of the country, introduction of ESL learning from early ages proved to be crucial (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014:6-7).

Kolkata, which became a part of the West Bengal State after the partition and liberation of India from the British rule, had to adopt a three-language education policy which was proposed in the Indian National Policy on Education in 1968. The three-language policy directed all states within India to learn three languages, namely Hindi, English and a regional language. Introduction of Hindi in the school curriculum in a region where Bengali is the lingua franca, led to discontent among the regular masses and the intelligentsia. Implementation of Hindi was seen to be an "undemocratic move" in the public schooling sphere. Bengali speakers were extremely proud of their culture and rich literary history. They grew more suspicious of non-vernacular languages (Meiringer, 2009:88). Later, according to Reuters (1981), the Left-Front government of West Bengal State, functioning from Kolkata, chose to remove English as a compulsory subject from the early childhood education (ECE)'s list. ESL made its way to Grade 5 from 1994, and to Grade 2 in 1999. ESL was reintroduced from Grade 1 in 2004 (Chattopadhyay, 2014:131). ESL had to be incorporated in the education

systems of both the cities. However, methodical studies regarding both the cities' pupils facing challenges and limitations in their ESL learning journeys garnered very little attention.

This study is a small effort to spread awareness about the study of language learning in the sphere of ECE and Applied Linguistics as a stand-alone sub-discipline. In the absence of such an effort, only by concentrating on classroom teaching techniques and dynamics, student-centric issues in a learning environment might not be adequately understood. For the creation of an effective and all-accommodating learning environment distinctive understanding of education, teaching, learning and acquisition is necessary. The teachers' problems are interrelated with the learners' problems but might not be identical all the time. Thus, it is a subject of constant research. This study concentrates on the understanding of 'learning' among teachers in Dhaka and Kolkata by using a qualitative methodology, with the research instruments like interviews, surveys and observations.

METHOD

This research was conducted using qualitative methodology. The design of the duration for the collection of data in this research is cross-sectional. The research design used within the broader methodology of qualitative study is exploratory. The research strategy used in order to achieve desired outcomes is comparative case study.

Qualitative comparative case study design is sometimes perceived as a hybrid model. It is perceived to bury the gap between case-oriented qualitative studies and variable-oriented quantitative studies. As a practical approach, qualitative comparative case study designs are found suitable for understanding complex, real-world situations (Cragun, Pal, Vadaparampil, Baldwin, Hampel, & DeBate, 2015:251-252). In the 1960s, it was believed that comparative research should be cross-national, especially in the field of education. Comparative research has moved away from that narrow definition since the 70s, but this research can be termed as cross-national (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017:6). In a qualitative case study design establishment-level or country-level or individual-level data from projects with samples irrespective of their sizes can be easily collected and analysed. All forms of structured data, like responses to closed-ended survey questions, semi-structured data, like responses to open-ended survey questions, or unstructured data like interview transcripts can be collected and analysed side by side using this design (Cragun et al., 2015:252-254). In this research, data has been gathered both by using unstructured interviews, passive observation and multiple-choice close-ended survey questionnaires. All the data for this research was collected at a single point of time.

The research population for this research is primarily based in Dhaka and Kolkata. A combination of three non-probabilistic sampling methods has been used in this study, convenience, purposive-judgemental and quota. This is because exploratory research is broad-ranging. To maximize the discovery of general tendencies of an ongoing phenomenon exploratory study has to be purposive and systematic (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2019:n.p.). Olawale, Chinagozi and Joe (2023:1385) have observed that due to exploratory research's 'evolutionary and historical' nature it aims at investigating undefined problems, providing better understanding of the problems rather than delivering concrete, conclusive solutions for them. Flexibility of exploratory research has greatly helped in the identification, communication and collection of research data from a sample size of 218 (109 after numerical adjustments from each city) pupils from four public primary schools of Dhaka and Kolkata, through survey questionnaire; 300 (150 from each city) public school teachers, who have some early childhood teaching experience in the public ECE sector, through survey questionnaire; and 20 (10 from each city) individuals from various sectors like journalism, social and cultural work, political activism, education etc., through interviews. The data received from all the samples and gathered using all the instruments were triangulated and analysed through thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

Classroom Conditions

From the data collected in 2022, classrooms in both Kolkata and Dhaka did not appear to be early childhood learner friendly. There was a documented anomaly in the pupil-teacher ratio, especially in Dhaka. From comparative analysis it was discovered that more classrooms in Dhaka suffered from noise, over-crowding and dust. In some schools of Kolkata over-crowding or pupil-teacher ratio in public schools' classrooms were not found to be the main concerns.

Understanding of ESL Learning Curriculums and Systems

In Dhaka, even specialised English teachers asked for questionnaires printed in Bengali to respond, and many among them could not differentiate among English curriculum designs like English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), or English as a First Language, etc. Most classrooms still have not incorporated audio-visual learning systems. Even in Kolkata, most classrooms still did not have adequate audio-visual learning systems. Unlike the teachers of Dhaka, teachers in Kolkata mainly tried to imitate either the British or the American English accents in order to teach English to the pupils. Indian Standard English pronunciation is not as prevalent in Kolkata's classrooms as in Dhaka's.

Views towards Government's Education Policies

Though the understanding of the distinction between government policies directed towards 'teaching atmosphere' and 'learning environment' within the classrooms were highly skewed, it drew 'extreme views' from the teachers of Dhaka. Here 'extreme views' connotes either illogical positivity towards government policies or unjustifiable pessimism towards them. A balanced approach to understand the cause and effect of a certain policy implementation was largely missing among teachers.

In Dhaka, it was observed that rather than manifesting the distinctive features of teaching, learning, acquisition and education teachers were more interested in understanding the underlying socio-cultural and socio-political ideologies behind the ESL curriculum designing process. Even there, confusion persisted regarding the categorisation of socio-political and socio-cultural ideas. Imminent squabbles appeared when teachers sat down to decide what makes a curriculum 'inclusive and diversified'. Differences continued on how to evaluate a curriculum, whether 'secular' or 'anti-religious', 'religious' or 'spiritual', 'traditional' or 'cultural', 'progressively conservative' or 'illiberal', 'conservative' or 'regressive'.

In Kolkata, contempt and extreme competitiveness persisted among the teaching community in respect to political affiliation, process of selection for the teaching job (whether qualified through formal examination or appointed only through interviews), educational background or schooling, individual affinity towards teaching, and the socio-economic background of the pupils dealt with. More teachers in Kolkata than in Dhaka were very careful in sharing their opinions on government-initiated education policies. The rate of 'no-response' on the multiple-choice questionnaire sheets in Kolkata was much higher compared to Dhaka. Kolkata has a long history of schools (primary, secondary, or higher secondary) turning into hotbeds of political clashes since the 1970s. It used to seriously affect early childhood classroom ESL learning, and public early childhood education (ECE) as a whole.

Public versus Private Contention in the ECE Sector

Highly qualified teachers of Dhaka, well-equipped with modern techniques of pedagogy leave public ECE sector for the financially lucrative private ECE sector. ESL learning materials remained poor for the majority of early childhood learners. Teachers educated abroad mostly prefer private ECE sector. Less-qualified teachers remain in the public sector. The teachers were mostly contented with grammar-translation based ESL teaching and the pupils with memory-based learning. Socio-economic and urban-rural divide play a crucial role in ESL learning environments. Disparities have been recorded in the access to resources not only between pupils in highly urbanised centres of Dhaka and surrounding rural regions, but also between urban pupils who come from the upper and middle socio-economic strata and those of lower socio-economic stratum.

In Kolkata, many of the teachers, employed to teach ESL in public schools, send their own children to schools where English is taught as a first language. Private schools in Kolkata mostly taught English as a first language. Whereas, most public schools preferred to teach Bengali as a first language. Some teachers in Kolkata thought the best atmosphere to learn English is the one where it is taught as a first language. Many respondents believed that private English-medium schools have exerted added pressure on mainstream ESL learning in public schools. Socio-economic class structure is also very relevant in ESL learning within Kolkata similar to Dhaka. Socio-religio-cultural identity markers called 'castes' also play an important role in ESL learning in Kolkata. 'Caste' issues were not found very prevalent in Dhaka's classrooms.

Overall Learning Conditions

In Dhaka, pupils were observed to struggle with simple English words both in speaking and writing because of minimal use of English outside the classroom. A lack of 'policy on technology' in early childhood education was observed both in Dhaka and Kolkata. New technologies can be identified as tangible and intangible. Tangible technology would include new devices like smart phone, laptop, tablets etc., and intangible technology would include social networking sites, e-commerce sites, entertainment streaming sites etc. Compared to Kolkata, greater number of educators in Dhaka were wary of the ill-effects of accessing new intangible technology by early childhood learners.

Educators of both the cities were not content with the assessment methods put in place. Especially in Kolkata, evaluation of early childhood ESL learners' competence through MCQ (Multiple-Choice Questionnaires) and the abolition of detention in primary grades are often seen among the main causes of challenges and limitations in early childhood ESL learning. Many respondents thought MCQ and 'no-detention' policy diluted the distinctive identification of linguistic performance and linguistic competence in public early childhood ESL learning environments.

DISCUSSIONS

As per Masadeh (2012:63-65) it would be wrong to blame only the teachers to not distinctively understand the significance of teaching, learning and education. In many cases, 'learning', 'acquisition', 'teaching', and even 'training', 'education' and 'development' are used interchangeably. Masadeh (2012:63-65) observes that the industrial sector view 'training' and 'development' as imparting knowledge for industrial efficiency. Though both formal and industrial training place importance on learning experience, and the positive outcome of learning is perceived as 'development', self-driven and task-based process of 'learning' is seen as too 'niche and academic'. Ghazali (2006:2-3) pointed out that differentiating between 'language learning' and 'language acquisition' after a certain extent as per linguistic theory becomes impossible. Both

learning and acquisition in ESL is concerned with achieving fluency, Ghazali (2006:2-3) defines learning to be a ‘conscious’ process of achieving fluency and acquisition to be ‘unconscious and naturalistic’.

Baranek (1996), Cole (2008), and Bus, Takacs and Kegel (2015) have all observed that socio-economics influences ESL learning in public primary schools of India and Bangladesh. When it comes to issues like lack of resources, under-qualified teachers in public classroom learning environments it can be seen both the teachers’ and learners’ community to be equally at stress. When it comes to over-dependence on grammar-translation method of teaching, inability to accommodate audio-visual learning and prevalence of poor instructions within public classrooms, the learners’ community is more at the losing end. Many can blame the private ECE sector for depriving public primary school-attending pupils from adequate learning experience by luring qualified teachers to switch, rather than understanding where public ECE sector fails to attract and retain qualified and efficient teachers. In the public ECE sector of Dhaka, focus is channelised more on intentions and ideologies behind government’s education policies and designing of the learning curriculums. Rather than gaining deeper understanding of basic distinctive features of pedagogy and Applied Linguistics, both philosophically and based on applicability. Whereas, in Kolkata, focus on individual differentiation among teachers acts as an obstacle for them to qualitatively evaluate the current and future prospects of learning, teaching, acquisition and education. There prevailed a lack of thought process in ECE sector which directs some teachers in Kolkata to think English is best taught as a first language. This stems from the lack of understanding of learning curriculum designing. No matter whether English is learnt as a first, or a second, or a third language, the aim of it all is to gain competence in the language. Sometimes, in a multilingual setting, where English is not the native language, trying to ‘force-fit’ learning of English as a first language may be seen as a threat to the native linguo-cultural identity. That might not prove very conducive for an all-accommodating learning environment and English learning as a whole. There are more rooms to discuss on how to design a curriculum where English becomes more ‘complementary’ and less ‘dominating’ in the linguistic ecology of a particular setting. Over-reliance on American or British accent while teaching English might give rise to identity crisis among learners, even if they do not outrightly revolt. This issue was not so prevalent in the classrooms of Dhaka. Emphasising on American or British accent while learning to speak can be justified while learning English as a foreign language. Learning English either as a second or a global language should transcend the boundaries of one or two particular accents. There is also an urgent need for effective training policy for teachers from both the cities on the incorporation of new emerging technologies, both tangible and intangible, in the formal sphere of ESL learning. Strict learning policies directly prohibiting caste discriminations within classrooms need to be put in place in Kolkata. Guney and Al (2012:2334) have observed that most of the time learning of a language in a classroom is evaluated on the basis of pedagogical philosophies and syllabus structuring. The influence of physical environment and social climate of schools on the learning of languages is not taken seriously. This observation reverberated in the data collected from Dhaka and Kolkata. For example, the anomalous teacher-to-pupil ratio or unkept classrooms of Dhaka and the implementation of MCQ assessment method and no-detention policy in Kolkata only exacerbated the chronic ailments of the physical environment and the social climate of public primary schools.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that a learning environment cannot be adequately evaluated only based on teachers’ perspectives and teaching practices in today’s day and age. There is a need for greater

awareness about the distinctive features of ‘learning’, ‘acquisition’, ‘teaching’ and ‘education’ among the population of Kolkata and Dhaka who are either directly or indirectly engaged with the public ECE sector. Issues which are creating obstacles in the path of smooth functioning of the learning environment and education system as a whole should be categorized. Issues faced by teachers and pupils in the public ECE sector should be placed in two different categories. Common issues that are faced by both the teachers and pupils should be placed in a third category. In this way policymakers will have a clear structural view of the language education landscape. It will help them to swiftly identify problems for each affected groups and frame an effective timeline to choose and execute their line of action. Sometimes disregarding prevailing linguistic ecology, especially in a multilingual setting, in order to learn one particular language faster, might not only harm an individual internally but also hamper the balance in the immediate linguistic surrounding.

This research paper presents the need to study learning dynamics separately from teaching and overall functioning of education systems. Only then the influence of politico-religio-cultural and socio-economic realities and associated ideologies on early childhood second language learning in 21st century would be adequately understood. Nguyen (2022:167-169) points out that in order to better understand the dynamics of discrimination in learning environments one needs to focus more on learning practices. Mainstream teaching practices and educational policies at times tries to rationalise and legitimise discrimination and condescension towards certain sections of the pupil population, which might be easily recorded from the learners’ experiences.

There is also a need to understand that technologies whether tangible or intangible either incorporated in mainstream education or not, does not make teaching, acquisition and learning processes generate equal results. Technologies will definitely bring changes in the processes of how a language is taught, acquired or learnt but that does not directly indicate their purposive boundaries will eventually disappear in near future.

When calls for a ‘decolonised’ ESL curriculum for early childhood learners in ex-British colonies, like India and Bangladesh are on the rise, prioritising learning and learner-oriented environments are becoming more important. Such calls are particularly gaining traction because there is a dearth of comparative studies between ex-European colonies on how they plan and design curriculums for European languages to meet rising interest in those languages. In the sphere of language learning, sociology of language becomes as important as sociolinguistics. Sociology of language studies how language influences society and sociolinguistics study the influence of society on language (Chen, 1997:1-13). Understanding both the disciplines will help in contextualising ‘English education’, ‘English learning’, ‘English teaching’ and ‘English acquisition’ as per the setting where it is pursued. There are spaces for debates on whether a foreign language, mainly brought by a ‘colonial master’ can ever be ‘decolonised’. Whether the right approach to ‘decolonisation’ would be ‘nativization’ or ‘globalisation’. All approaches might fail unless how English is acquired, learnt, taught and used is contextualised as per a particular setting. That is how even historians, anthropologists and sociologists would benefit from language learning research, apart from linguists and educationists. To better guide early childhood language learners in their ESL journeys, it has become crucial to think whether language should be learnt just as a medium of communication or as part of developing broader cognitive skills. Early childhood English learning is deemed to play a greater role for the progression of English language throughout the tender age of a person both in Dhaka and Kolkata. Many teachers and parents in both the cities, as Chasney (2019) asserted, are accepting the idea that sooner a child starts learning English (whether as a second language or a first language) the brighter are his/her prospects to be proficient in it.

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