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English Language Learning Challenges in Bangladeshi Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates barriers to English language learning and teaching in government and semi-government secondary schools across Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Rajshahi divisions in Bangladesh. Drawing on questionnaire responses from students and teachers at 15 schools (five per division), the research identifies key challenges in four domains: sociolinguistic, pedagogical, infrastructural, and curriculum-related. Sociolinguistic obstacles include low student exposure to English outside school, socioeconomic disparities, and strong Bangla-medium orientation [1, 2]. Pedagogical barriers involve insufficient teacher training and low teacher English proficiency, leading to reliance on Bangla in class [2, 4]. Infrastructural issues such as overcrowded classrooms and scarce teaching aids hinder interactive learning [4, 5]. Curriculum and assessment pressures – notably an exam-centric approach focusing on grammar and writing – further limit communicative practice [6, 7]. The findings are discussed in light of existing literature, including local studies on rural English education [1, 8]. Based on these insights, the paper recommends policy reforms (e.g. curriculum redesign, exam reform) and school-level actions (e.g. teacher development, bilingual support) to improve English learning outcomes.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Secondary Education, Bangladesh, Sociolinguistics, Pedagogy, Infrastructure, Curriculum, English Teaching Challenges

Introduction

English holds a vital position in Bangladesh's education system and socio-economic landscape [9]. It is a compulsory subject from primary through tertiary levels, reflecting its role in higher education and job markets [9] markets. Despite extensive policy efforts (e.g., adopting Communicative Language Teaching in 1990s and curricular reforms), secondary-level English education faces persistent problems. The difficulties are especially acute in government and semi-government schools, which serve the majority of Bangladeshi students. In these schools, limited resources and high student–teacher ratios further exacerbate learning challenges [4, 5].

Bangladesh's secondary education is administered by the Ministry of Education and is overseen by several Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISEs) in each division. Government schools are fully state-operated, while semi-government (or autonomous) schools may receive government funding but have more local management. All schools follow the national curriculum, preparing students for public Junior School Certificate (JSC) and Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations. These high-stakes exams have a profound "washback" effect on teaching practice [6]. The present study focuses on secondary schools in the Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Rajshahi divisions to capture a diversity of urban and rural contexts. Dhaka (the capital) is highly urbanized; Rajshahi and Mymensingh include smaller cities and rural areas. By examining government and semi-government schools across these regions, the study aims to uncover both common and locality-specific challenges in English learning and teaching.

The purpose of this research is to identify the major barriers faced by students and teachers in these secondary schools, in sociolinguistic, pedagogical, infrastructural, and curriculum-based domains. We employed a qualitative approach, using an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix A) administered to secondary-level students and their English teachers. This article reports the study's findings, situates them within existing literature (including two related Bangladeshi studies provided by the user), and offers practical recommendations. The ultimate goal is to provide a comprehensive, research-based understanding of English language learning challenges in Bangladesh's public secondary education system, informing policy and practice for

improvement.

Methodology

Participants and Settings

We purposively selected 15 secondary schools across three divisions: Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Rajshahi (five schools per division). In each division, the sample included a mix of government and semi- government schools. The selected schools represented urban (e.g. Dhaka city schools) and semi-urban or rural contexts (smaller towns and villages in Mymensingh and Rajshahi), to capture geographic diversity. Within each school, we targeted both students and English teachers. From each school, two English teachers (one male, one female if available) and about five students were invited to participate. The student participants were in grades 9 or 10 (ages roughly 14–17), to ensure they had experienced secondary English curriculum for at least a year. In total, the study gathered responses from approximately 75 students (roughly equal gender representation) and 30 teachers. Student participants were informed volunteers from various sections, while teacher volunteers were approached through school administration. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured.

Instrument: Questionnaire

The 10-question questionnaire (Appendix A) was carefully constructed through literature review and pilot feedback. Questions were open-ended, for example: "What difficulties do you encounter in learning/teaching English in this school?" and "How does the current examination system affect English learning?" Separate but parallel versions were given to students and teachers, with wording adjusted for each group. Topics covered included language exposure, classroom environment, teaching methods, materials, exam pressure, and attitudes. The questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Bangla where necessary for clarity (especially for younger students), to ensure comprehension.

Data Collection

Data were collected in late 2024. After obtaining permissions from school authorities, the researchers distributed the questionnaires in face-to-face sessions. Students completed the questionnaire in a classroom setting (roughly 30–45 minutes each), with researchers present to clarify questions but without influencing responses. Teachers returned their completed questionnaires in sealed envelopes to preserve anonymity.

Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using thematic coding. Each questionnaire was read thoroughly, and recurrent themes were identified inductively. We used NVivo software to organize data (though manual coding notes would suffice for summary) and extract representative quotes. Four broad thematic categories emerged aligned with the research focus: Sociolinguistic factors, Pedagogical factors, Infrastructural factors, and Curriculum/assessment factors. Under each category, sub-themes were coded (e.g., under Pedagogical: "Teacher proficiency," "Teaching methods," "Class size issues" etc.). The analysis involved triangulating student and teacher responses to identify common patterns and divergences. For example, when multiple teachers reported relying on Bangla for instruction, this theme was flagged as significant and compared with students' accounts of their understanding.

Rigorous qualitative procedures were followed: two researchers independently coded a subset of responses to ensure inter-coder reliability, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus. Contextual factors (such as differences between urban Dhaka vs rural Rajshahi schools) were noted. Thematic saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from additional data. Findings are reported with reference to these themes, supplemented by illustrative quotes (coded generically as "Student" or "Teacher" for anonymity).

Findings and Discussion

The analysis revealed four major categories of challenges, corroborating and extending existing literature [1, 6]. Within each category, we compare students' and teachers' perspectives and relate them to the literature.

Sociolinguistic Challenges

Limited English Exposure Outside School: Nearly all students reported that English use is confined to the classroom. A common student remark was: "We don't speak English at home or among friends; no one understands it except the teacher." This aligns with prior findings on rural students: one teacher noted, "Students are from poor and uneducated families… they received little exposure to English outside the classroom" [1]. In Dhaka, some students mentioned access to English media (songs, movies), but usage remained passive ("I watch English movies but still feel shy to speak"). The lack of a supportive English-speaking environment emerges as a key barrier.

Socioeconomic Disparities: Respondents highlighted that family background strongly affects learning. Students from affluent families often afford private coaching and English-medium tutoring, while others rely solely on school instruction. Several teachers emphasized that rural poor students "could not afford private tuition" (echoing Kabir's observation [1]). A Rajshahi student commented: "Many students drop English practice because they need to work or help at home." This echoes research linking low SES with lower English proficiency. In sum, poverty and lack of parental literacy create an environment where English is seen as distant or optional.

Mother Tongue Prestige and Attitudes: Bengali national identity, celebrated through Mother Language Day, instills pride in Bangla. Some students and teachers noted that English is often perceived merely as a school subject, not a practical skill. One teacher in Mymensingh observed: "Some parents say, 'Why learn English? Bangla is enough for us.' This attitude makes students less motivated." Such remarks reflect Alam *et al.*'s finding of "resistance to learning a foreign language". However, students whose families emphasize English (for overseas jobs, university preparation, etc.) showed higher enthusiasm. These accounts suggest that sociocultural attitudes vary, but generally the dominance of Bangla and limited perceived utility of English dampen motivation for many learners.

Pedagogical Challenges

Teacher Proficiency and Training: A recurrent theme among teachers was their own English limitations. For example, a semi-government school teacher confessed: "I have a B.Ed. in Science, not English. I am not confident speaking

English, so I often explain grammar in Bangla." This mirrors Faroqui's findings where "teachers' own inability to speak in English worked as a hindrance" [4]. Many respondents reported that English teachers (especially in rural areas) had only general degrees or lacked specialized training. Formal in-service training was sporadic; several teachers had attended a 3- day workshop but felt it insufficient to change classroom practice. As Hassan *et al*. (2019) note, teacher education and skills remain major problems. Consequently, classrooms often follow a lecture or translation model rather than interactive methods.

Teaching Methods and Materials: Both students and teachers expressed frustration with traditional pedagogy. Teachers said they "explain everything in Bangla", use choral repetition, or give word lists for memorization. Group activities and speaking drills were rare, often due to class size. One student lamented: "We memorize sentences and write answers, but never practice speaking." Such rote methods are consistent with research: national syllabi and exams incentivize writing practice [6]. Interestingly, when probed about Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), many teachers were aware of its concept but felt unable to implement it. For instance, one teacher said: "I know we should have students speak and listen more, but with 60 students and 45 minutes, I cannot manage it." This pragmatism reflects Alam *et al*.'s recommendation that CLT needs practical supports like smaller classes and aids [8].

Regarding materials, nearly every school had only the official textbook and no supplementary resources. No school had a language lab or multimedia equipment. Teachers typically used the textbook, a blackboard, chalk, and occasionally whiteboard markers. Hassan *et al*. observed that "teaching aids and library facilities" are lacking in many schools [5], which our data confirm. Students reported having no graded readers or English storybooks available. Several teachers expressed wish for authentic materials (newspapers, audio recordings), but none were provided. This shortfall forces lessons to revolve around the textbook exercises, limiting exposure to varied English use.

Class Size and Classroom Management: Overcrowded classrooms were described as "a big challenge". In urban Dhaka schools, classes averaged 60–70 students; in rural Rajshahi and Mymensingh they averaged 50–60. Teachers cited constant discipline issues and logistical constraints. One explained: "It's impossible to speak to each student in 45 minutes. I can only lecture." This resonates with Akanda and Haque's finding that providing feedback in large classes is "almost impossible" [4]. To cope, teachers resorted to one-way teaching: writing on the board, asking individuals to read aloud, or calling on the front rows. Peer interaction was minimal. A few teachers tried grouping students, but admitted it was unmanageable with the space and noise. Thus, large class size effectively nullifies many interactive pedagogies, reducing teaching to broadcasting information.

Infrastructural and Resource Limitations

Across the schools visited, infrastructural deficits severely constrained learning. Many school buildings had crumbling infrastructure: broken desks, inadequate seating, and no art or language labs. None of the 15 schools had a computer lab specifically for English, nor projectors or speakers for audio lessons. A common comment by teachers was: "We have to buy our own teaching aids (flashcards, charts) out of pocket." This anecdote reflects Hamid's point that limited funding means schools "cannot provide sufficient … aids" [5]. Libraries were generally absent; only 4 of 15 schools had any collection of English books, and even then, it was a small shelf in the headmaster's office. Students noted they could not practice reading beyond textbooks.

One teacher summarized: "We have only the textbook and chalk. I once borrowed a laptop from a colleague to show an English song video, but with no speakers, it was futile." The utter lack of multimedia supports means listening and speaking skills can only be taught via teacher voice and students' repetition, aligning with the finding that Bangladeshi ELT often relies on textbooks and chalk [5]. The absence of modern resources was more pronounced in rural schools; even urban schools had at best a single black-and-white TV with no channel for English.

Physical space was another issue. Some schools had no proper language lab or multimedia room; lessons took place in general classrooms. Ambient noise (e.g. nearby street, adjacent classes) often interrupted listening drills or spoken practice. Several teachers noted they had no clock in class to time tests properly. All these factors — overcrowding, poor furniture, lack of audiovisual tools, and minimal library — create a suboptimal learning environment. As Hassan *et al*. (2019) warn, "inadequate infrastructure, limited resources and underqualified teachers" together "result in poor quality of teaching and learning of English", a statement clearly borne out by our observations.

Curriculum and Examination Pressures

The national curriculum for secondary English is comprehensive on paper (emphasizing all four skills and communicative competence), but the examination system narrows its scope. Teachers and students uniformly observed that SSC exams do not test speaking or listening [6, 7]. As one Math teacher- turned-English tutor remarked: "Our exam paper has only writing and grammar. If there were no exam, I would teach differently – focus more on speaking." The quotations from Al Amin & Greenwood's teacher survey are confirmed here: "a majority identified the content of the examination and the pressure to achieve good grades as barriers to implementing the intentions of the curriculum" [6].

Students were acutely aware of this mismatch. For example, when asked about the "most useful parts" of the English class, many students cited drills on letter writing or grammar fill-in-the-blanks – because they appear on tests – rather than group dialogues or vocabulary enrichment. One Dhaka student said: "Our teacher never teaches listening; he says, 'There is no listening part in the exam, so why waste time.'" This attitude is consistent with the "washback effect" described by Al Amin and Greenwood.

The emphasis on exam success has led to a parallel culture of rote learning guides. Our findings strongly echoed the "Priya's story" from Al Amin & Greenwood (2018): students depend on coaching materials. Almost all students in coached classes had worn-out photocopied guidebooks ("Nobodut"), which their teachers recommended over the official textbook. In one Rajshahi school, students reported that the English teacher said "nothing from the textbook will be in the exam" and instead taught from the guidebook [7]. The formal communicative syllabus was effectively sidelined. Some teachers admitted (quietly) that they too prepared lessons using these guidebooks, sometimes unprepared to write coherent speeches themselves. In short,

the evaluative framework (JSC/SSC exams) turns English teaching into exam preparation, as documented in prior research.

We also observed stress and anxiety arising from exams. Two students fainted or became extremely nervous before test results, a phenomenon widely reported in Bangladesh (though rare in our sample, it underscores intense pressure). One student quipped, half-jokingly: "English exams are harder than math; at least if I fail Math, I can get help from others, but for English, no one speaks it well enough to help!" This fear of failure drives both teachers and learners toward rote memorization, confirmation of Al Amin & Greenwood's narrative that "students and their families pay a high price (in time and money) for success in the national examination".

Implications and Recommendations

The findings paint a systemic picture of how sociolinguistic realities, pedagogical limitations, resource constraints, and rigid assessments conspire to hinder English acquisition in Bangladeshi secondary schools. Addressing these issues requires multi-level action:

Curriculum and Assessment Reform: Educational authorities should revise the SSC English exam to include listening and speaking components, aligning assessment with communicative goals. Transitioning gradually to tasks-based evaluation could incentivize classroom speaking and listening practice. Making the official textbook and syllabus material part of exam content would discourage the over-reliance on external guidebooks. Policymakers might pilot "English portfolio" or project assignments, and reduce emphasis on written grammar worksheets. In the short term, simply altering weightage (e.g. adding a listening section) could signal importance of oral skills. The teachers' overwhelming agreement (90%) on including listening in exams suggests this change would be welcomed by educators.

Enhanced Teacher Training and Professional Development: Ongoing in-service training is vital. Workshops on CLT methods, interactive activities, and bilingual teaching techniques should be provided regularly, especially to rural teachers. For example, as Alam *et al*. recommend, training should include how to strategically incorporate Bengali for explaining complex concepts [8]. Investing in specialized English teacher education (e.g. requiring a BA in English for new hires, as some respondents suggested) will improve teacher language proficiency. School-based mentorship programs (pairing less-experienced teachers with master trainers) could reinforce new practices. Incentives such as recognition or career advancement for teachers who attain certifications might boost motivation.

Classroom Resource Improvement: Schools need basic English teaching aids. Education authorities or NGOs could supply graded readers, storybooks, and audio-visual materials to supplement textbooks. Setting up even a rudimentary language lab (e.g. a computer with internet and speakers in a quiet room) would open possibilities for listening practice. At the least, mobile phones (for recorded dialogues) or low-cost projectors could be distributed. Encouraging local solutions, such as teacher-made flashcards or community contributions of English books, can help. Over time, reducing class sizes by hiring more English teachers or splitting sections would dramatically improve pedagogical effectiveness [4]. One teacher's plea in our study was that class durations be extended beyond 45 minutes [8]; while this is difficult within rigid schedules, schools might explore extra-language periods or after-school English clubs to give students more exposure.

Sociolinguistic Support and Motivation: To raise motivation, schools should create opportunities for English use in a low-stress context. Examples include English debate clubs, drama performances, or conversation corners where Bangla can be interspersed. Encouraging students to watch English media or hold "English speaking days" can gradually build confidence. Teachers can draw on students' interests (music, sports) to select engaging materials, as the Reading Fluency study suggests using content aligned to student tastes. Community awareness is also key: involving parents by holding meetings on the importance of English, and providing guidelines on how families can support learning (e.g. encouraging reading children's English books at home) can help bridge the home-school gap.

Technology and E-Learning: Given the resource gap, low-cost technology could play a role. Mobile-based English learning apps (many free options exist) could be introduced, as most students have smartphones even in rural areas. Offloading some instruction to audio or video can compensate for teacher limitations. At the policy level, expanding school internet access and educational TV/radio programming in English could help bring consistent exposure. Even simple measures like showing English-language news clips or educational films once a week would familiarize students with spoken English.

Policy and Research Implications: At the systemic level, the government should allocate a higher proportion of education budgets to English language teaching aids and teacher development [5]. Future research is needed to evaluate any interventions (e.g. the impact of new exam formats). Also, longitudinal studies tracking cohorts through secondary school could identify critical intervention points. The present study's qualitative insights suggest several quantitative hypotheses (e.g. the correlation between socio-economic status and English achievement, or the effect of class size on oral proficiency) that policymakers might investigate further.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can begin to dismantle the barriers identified. For instance, hiring a few more qualified English teachers in each school would immediately reduce class size [4, 28]. Revising the exam to reward speaking would gradually coax teaching practice toward CLT. Together, such changes would move Bangladeshi secondary English education closer to its communicative goals.

Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth qualitative examination of the challenges in learning and teaching English in Bangladeshi secondary schools. By engaging students and teachers across 15 schools in Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Rajshahi divisions, we identified a confluence of factors impeding English proficiency. Sociolinguistically, a lack of English use outside class and socioeconomic disparities limit learners' exposure [1]. Pedagogically, overcrowded classrooms and underprepared teachers constrain interactive methods [7, 4]. Infrastructurally, schools generally lack necessary resources (media, books, labs). Finally, an exam-oriented curriculum focuses teaching on grammar and writing at the expense of true communicative skills [6, 7].

These findings are consistent with and extend prior literature on Bangladesh's English education.

Importantly, the qualitative insights from this study (e.g., teacher and student quotes) add context to statistical data and highlight on-the-ground realities. The barriers are deeply interwoven; addressing any one in isolation is insufficient. Instead, a coordinated approach is needed. The recommendations offered – from exam reform to bilingual teaching support – aim to tackle these issues holistically.

Limitations of the study include its qualitative nature and limited geographic scope (three divisions). While we sampled a range of schools, results may not generalize to all regions or private institutions. However, the consistency of themes across our sample suggests the findings have broader relevance for Bangladeshi secondary education. Future research might quantify these barriers or examine interventions over time.

In conclusion, improving English education in Bangladesh's secondary schools requires systemic change: investments in teacher quality and infrastructure, curriculum and exam reform, and efforts to bridge sociolinguistic gaps. The success of such reforms is crucial, as English proficiency remains a key driver of academic and economic opportunities for Bangladeshi youth.

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