

# Challenges behind Decolonising the English Language Teaching Curriculum of Bangladeshi Universities

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the challenges in decolonising the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum in the context of Bangladeshi universities. It centers on the author's auto-ethnographic experiences of learning and teaching of English language at the tertiary level. Drawing on a qualitative approach, the study involves a critical analysis of current ELT curriculum, as followed by Bangladeshi universities. The paper discusses how the ELT curriculum in post-colonial Bangladesh continues to be characterised by a preference for or bias towards an Anglophile, Eurocentric, Global North, western and white understanding of English language use. The study at first aims to substantiate the urgency of decolonising the tertiary ELT curriculum in Bangladesh. More specifically, it envisions to interrogate the current ELT curriculum and its effects on tertiary English language practices in Bangladesh. It suggests some ways to decolonise the tertiary ELT practiced by Bangladeshi universities and then asks for a pedagogical approach to incorporate southern ways of practicing English as a decolonial option.

**Keywords:** Tertiary ELT, English Education in Bangladesh, English-only values, Curriculum politics and Decolonisation

## **Introduction:**

The current English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum including its textbooks practiced by Bangladeshi universities continue to rely on Anglo-centric values and ideologies of English language. The image of English as a global lingua franca and its resultant hegemonic assumptions have usually characterised ELT curriculum of universities in the post-colonial countries like Bangladesh (Hamid, 2021). ELT-induced textbooks are reported to present English as a universal structure rather than as a local and social practice (Alam, 2018; Pennycook, 2010). They also tend to highlight native-like perfection required for English users and learners in their communications with Anglophone users and epistemic activities in English (Nguyen, Marlina and Cao, 2021). Against this English-only backdrop, a basic pedagogical question should be advanced: how can Bangladeshi universities strive to decolonise ELT curriculum through southern perspectives of linguistic appropriation, compatibility, competence and conditioning?

The paper draws on the southern conceptualisations (Connell, 2007) on English including neo-colonial politics of English (Canagarajah, 1999; Philipson, 1992). It will deconstruct English as a pluriversal, local, individual practice, production and appropriation rather than as a universal structure (Pennycook, 2010; Garcia, 2014; Kachru, 2013). Southern discourses and ideologies of English language that underlie an epistemic ecology and involve context-sensitive non-authoritarian methods

of English learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2011) will be adopted to deconstruct and decolonise the current ELT curriculum operating in Bangladeshi English Studies. The conceptualisations of “unequal Englishes” (Tupas, 2015) and orientalist representation and linguistic monochromatism (wa Thiong’o, 1986; Said, 1994) will also be analysed. Additionally, the thesis will apply theoretical lenses that dissect the politics of ELT textbooks. Textbooks, published by dominant Anglo-American publishers, e.g., Oxford, Cambridge, Longman, Routledge, and etc., inscribe an explicit sense of social location of power (Freire, 2005; Grosfoguel, 2011). On the contrary, some language textbooks acknowledge rights of other languages and promote “supranational human rights covenants” (Philipson, 1992, p.93). The linguistic monopoly that is allegedly aided by textbooks serves to normalise English-only ideologies and values in Bangladeshi English Studies (Gray, 2010). All of these critiques of textual politics of ELT hint at the conjuncture to confront ELT textbooks and to decolonise the curriculum. They also suggest some ways of seeing English as learners’ own practice and tool that they can freely master or utilise without sacrificing integrity for their first language (Canagarajah, 2007). The monolithic sources and objectives of ELT draw on Anglo-American books that are found to construct and substantiate a linguistic periphery within the outer circle of English language (Canagarajah, 1999; Fairclough, 1995; Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 2007). Besides, the enactment of English as “the legitimate language” in opposition to L1 (first language) results in “socially constructed dispositions of the linguistic habitus”, that presupposes some particular motivations, abilities and criteria to speak L2 (Bourdieu, 1991, pp.39&57). All of these conceptualisations will be discussed to gauge the politics of tertiary textbooks of ELT and their effects on Bangladeshi tertiary English language teaching and learning. In the main, the paper strives to emanate the following questions as a means of questioning the de facto ELT values, finding the pathway for overcoming these values and stressing the need for decolonising ELT practices in Bangladesh:

- What are the challenges behind decolonising ELT in Bangladesh?
- What are the values and ideologies of English enacted by ELT textbooks and to what extent do they affect students’ English learning in Bangladesh?
- What are the ways to confront Anglo-centric ELT and to promote southern practices of English in post-colonial societies like Bangladesh?

Research on decolonising tertiary curriculum and ELT textbooks practiced in Bangladesh is rare to date. The previous research has largely focused on extensively stratified forms of Bangladeshi pre-university English education, sentimental linguistic nationalism coupled with an ambivalent status of English language in the country and frictions between Bangla (mother tongue of Bangladesh) and English (Chowdhury and Sarkar, 2014; Chowdhury and Kabir, 2014). It has also studied English language policy, practice, its key methodology and discourses (Chowdhury and Sarkar, 2018), the material and power fetishism of ELT and its bartering outlooks (Alam, 2018) and the privatisation, provincialisation and hierarchisation of English education in Bangladesh (Hamid and Erling 2016). Of late, Hamid (2022) has talked about the empowerment of southern Englishes in a global south context like Bangladesh and also stressed on “interrogating the “English” of English Studies taught in Bangladesh (Hamid, 2021, p.11). Tertiary ELT textbook analysis in the academia of postcolonial counterparts of Bangladesh, e.g., South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia and so on, has received scholarly attention. For instance, Nguyen, Marlina and Cao (2021) in their study urge to place local Vietnamese textbooks to gear towards implementing a liberal and multilingual access of English through an EIL-based (English as an international language) pedagogy. Vitta (2021) unpacks roles and characteristics of ELT textbooks and textbook analysis, claiming that they accelerate L2 acquisition keeping pace with language research, ongoing developments in language learning and changing linguistic demands. Sheldon observes the significance of language textbooks in constituting learners’ linguistic development and competence in L2 or target language (1988). From curriculum development to material design and learner-centred language learning these textbooks play instrumental roles

(McGrath, 2002; Miller, 2011; Ur, 1996; Wong, 2017). All of these studies, however, do not focus on decolonising ELT curriculum or textbooks. They do not offer any suggestion on possible decolonial options for English language teaching in post-colonial countries.

### **Problematising the Curriculum as a political construct/instrument of control**

Curriculum is a formulaic pattern of knowledge or discourses on a variety of academic subjects and disciplines, which are institutionalised in imparting, creating and researching myriads of knowledge practices. In a globalised world, knowledge practices are based on “power relations”(Gopal, 2017), given that the institutional and formal knowledge of different disciplines stem from economically and politically powerful countries. The world of knowledge and the world of power have always been the same, a world limited to European and global learning, which has differentiated itself from the non-European and non-north-American as the rest or “the other”. In this differentiating process, a western supremacist orientalism, which is an all-pervading ensemble of cultural discourses, e.g., from science to cinema, from creative arts to info-technology, from literature to journalism, has been instrumental to legitimate western power and control. From the post-Renaissance-Enlightenment time, this knowledge-based superiority of the west continued to result in imperial control over other parts of the world. Then western cultural or imperial pursuits of conquest and commerce culminated in colonialism, which enacted not only its physical occupation and subjugation in Asia, Africa, South America and other parts of the world, but supplanted indigenous language, learning and education with western norms and ethos. In the post-colonial world, this encroachment has ceased to reveal its physical or explicit forms, but continues to occur via myriads of subtle cultural or otherwise discursive politics. Curriculum and the wider spectrum of global academia is a fundamental site of imperial or neo-colonial control in the post-colonial world.

The curriculum which enjoys a globalism in the present world is part of a “cultural and historical literacy” shapes a “code or symbol” of superiority of “Eurocentric or Western dominated” (Cornbleth, 2000, p.9) epistemology. Thus, the superiority-shaping discourse “as code or symbol of cultural literacy can be seen as an attempt to control curriculum knowledge not only by means of official curriculum policy but also by dominating the public and professional discourse that (re)defines legitimate or appropriate curriculum knowledge and teaching” (Cornbleth, 2000, p.9). In the current world, control and power function through a constancy and intricacy of this cultural or discursive code, which ostensibly serves people in their civilizational concerns, but implicitly implants a reliance on the totalising or hegemonic discourses (Foucault, 1978) of ethos, knowledge and life orientations. Curriculum is a domain to exhibit newer tools of control, and what Foucault calls “regime of truths” (Foucault, 1978). It trespasses every fabric of non-western knowledge practices and creates an epistemology-based power relation among different nations and races and their knowledge. It overtly makes the decision on the inclusion and exclusion of certain authors, texts, genres and forms. So the curriculum is actively engaged in shaping and validating canonicity and conventions.

Moreover, the curriculum and its texts can be interrogated for retarding learners’ interest in their indigenous heritage of literature and culture and injects into them a feeling of self-denial, self-denigration and imperial dependency (wa Thiong’o, 1986; Perley, 2019; Altbach and Kelly, 1978). Thus, the curriculum is found linked to the neo-colonial agenda of education and to precipitate a massive vacuum in the formation of a Southern epistemology, and an anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and anti-anthropocentric world order. Thus, curriculum works as a residue of imperial politics of binarising or othering knowledge of different nations and reproduces some neo-colonial control in the forms of an Orientalised or colonial gaze. Catherine Cornbleth (2000, pp.11-12) contend that the univocity of modern-imperial curriculum policies mute “multicultural national identities” and harbour an exclusionary ideal of showing some social and individual identities as “monocultural” (e.g., black or white or Asian). In the crafted array of curriculum, from “curriculum policymaking” to syllabus formation, “revision or framework and standards” there lie attempt and contrivance “of trying to control the knowledge to be made available to students in classrooms across the district, state, or

nation” (Cornbleth, 2000, pp.11-12). This knowledge control attaches a classicist, elitist and cultural control or dominance of some race and nation over others.

Curriculum practice involves processes and policies which have subtle visions of power. Placing some texts in and out of the curriculum is a discursive politics that follows a “complex and unstable process”. In such a subtle process, discourses or some cultural artifacts and texts of some particular races, nations, ethnicities and gender enjoy an absolute cultural entitlement or right to be placed and practiced over the years, decades and even centuries. Thus, curriculum as a cultural body of discourses “can be both an instrument and an effect of power” (Foucault, 1978a, p.101) that diminishes some social identities and their resistance in making some more dominant and acceptable. Curriculum of discourses, moreover, spatially and temporally “transmits and produces power and reinforces it” (Foucault, 1978b, pp. 100-1). Politically and economically dominant nations authorised their own curriculum of discourses on the colonised nations in the colonial era and they continue to have a stronghold in the policy, pedagogy and real-life practices.

### **Critical Analysis of ELT:**

The ELT curriculum of Bangladesh largely stresses on different methods of English language teaching and learning which are the offshoots of Anglo-American theorisation and standardization of English language. All the methods underlie, as Jack Richards (2017, p.15) observes, the following things:

- “The basic units of language are vocabulary and grammar.”
- “Learners everywhere have the same needs.”
- “Learners’ needs are identified exclusively in terms of language needs.”
- “The process of learning a language is largely determined by the textbook.”

It has not involved an eclectic approach to English language teaching-learning practices and always lacked in context-specific or Bangladeshi learners’ self-contextualising realities including their deep fervour for Bangla language and literature in English education practices. Creative writing either in Bengali or in English has not received any attention in this model. Moreover, there has always been an enormous gulf of intersectional interaction between literature and ELT. (Alam, 2021) Bengali or English literature that endorses postcolonial leitmotifs of decolonisation and localisation of education and that envisages the wholistic creative-critical exercises in English language as a social practice guided by a Global Southern pedagogy has not been paid adequate scholarly concentration in the tertiary ELT curriculum of Bangladesh. Neither the teachers nor learners are offered the opportunity for discerning the lacunae they have in language teaching-learning practices because they are coursebook bound. These coursebooks are not altogether relevant to and familiar with their life: they do not deal with anything with the broader socio-historico-cultural life shared by teachers and learners. As Alam (2021, p.221) pinpoints, these books have perfunctory contents which are purely out of the context as far as Southern language teaching-learning realities are concerned and are “also not the kind of matter that could deliver results, especially when in the hands of teachers who had little or no training or knowledge of, or interest in, ELT pedagogy.” Teachers then cannot put into use a critical empathy with the students in the broader creative-critical practices. Thus, a sense of frustration and abnegation is found to be pent up among the students. Most of the contents have grown outdated in the west and lost any contraction in the academia but they are indispensable parts of Bangladeshi Curricula. However, issues pertaining to critical pedagogy, linguistic equity, social justice and hegemonising language policies have not been predominantly showcased in the current ELT syllabi and curricular practices.

The current ELT curriculum – as followed by Bangladeshi universities – encapsulates some of the core units that are solely drawn from Anglo-American curricula contents. The following courses/units form the tertiary ELT and Applied Linguistics syllabus:

- Approaches and Methods in L2 Teaching
- Syllabus Design
- Materials Development
- Instruction in the Basic Skills
- Assessment and Testing
- Technology in L2 Teaching
- Language Teacher Education
- Syllabus Design and Materials Development
- Language Testing, Evaluation and Assessment
- Second Language Acquisition (SLA)
- Current Issues in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching
- Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis
- English in Diverse World Contexts
- Language Teacher Education and Practicum
- Teaching Different Areas and Skills of Language
- English for Specific Purposes
- Teaching different areas and skills of L2
- Teaching English to Young Learners
- Technology Enhanced Language Teaching
- Teaching Language through Literature
- Language Policy and Planning

Students are taught courses on English language acquisition theories, language learning values and techniques, language enactment through policy and planning and purpose-specific application of English language. Other courses are devoted to imparting knowledge on second language skills, instructions for young learners in English language learning. Some of the units are directed towards students' future need-based learning: these units include materials that focus on teaching, evaluation and curriculum and syllabus oriented theories. Scope and utilisation of technology in English language teaching and learning is also an important component in this curriculum. The critical pedagogy or the endeavour to accommodate Southern and diverse language practices are encapsulated in some units like “English in Diverse World Contexts” and “World Englishes”.

#### **Discussion:**

Last two decades of ELT practices in Bangladesh are marked with Anglo-American textbook values and ideologies that center around Applied Linguistics, Education, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and English Language Teaching (ELT). In the main, textbooks have been seen to privilege ELT practices, material development and L2-based (second/target language)

theories of language learning, approaches to and methods of language teaching, designing language tasks and planning language lessons. Other textbooks showcase phonetic dynamics of Anglicised pronunciation, discourse analysis and pragmatics, use of technical and technological affordances in language learning and teaching, assessment systems and curriculum/syllabus design, material design, testing and evaluation. All these are modeled on ELT textbooks and curriculum of Anglo-American universities.

ELT curriculum and L2-centric textbooks followed by Bangladeshi universities need to be decolonised for their continued Anglo-American leniency. Alam (2018, p.12) finds the ELT textbooks taught at Bangladeshi universities “slight in content and unattractive reads” and maintains that they do not square with needs and interests of teachers. These textbooks are also noted to lack bigger sociolinguistic scopes and purposes of English language, i.e., epistemic justice, use of English for local creative-critical practices and linguistic inclusivity (Tomlinson, 2008). Given these pitfalls of ELT, the decolonisation of ELT curriculum is an exigency for Bangladeshi universities because it will lead to the empowerment and inclusion of textbooks created by outer circles of English. It will help to shape a critical pedagogy of English and enhance cross-disciplinary exchanges with ELT studies. It will also be instrumental in fostering avenues of a more contextualised and indigenous form of creative-critical applications of English. Thus, interrogating and decolonising ELT in the context of Bangladeshi universities will subvert and write back the imperial ELT curriculum and textbooks.

This study problematises the current ELT and its exogenous curriculum. The curriculum and its textual norms have not given importance to a critical language pedagogy and its desubalternising essence. As a result, the alignment of English language with broader “local and social” aspirations of sociolinguistic freedom and cultural emancipation is not tangibly seen in the non-native countries (Pennycook, 2010, p.129; Freire, 2005). In addition to the imperial nature of ELT, its geopolitical roots and utilitarian aura lead to the parochialisation of English Studies and disempowerment of its decolonising fervour in Bangladesh. The paper also examines the gulf between ELT and other cross-disciplinary studies that serves to reduce the creative writing and other literary, critical, and artistic exercises in English around Bangladesh. In turn, possibilities of the diversification and decolonisation of English language use from local perspectives are not gaining a cultural momentum here.

ELT ideologies and values continue to be a monochromatic language reality in the Bangladeshi context of English Studies with specific focus on native-like linguistic accuracy. In addition, they have been found to promote an imperial representation of English that enacts, valorises and vindicates English language as an embellished, authentic, standard and unquestionable phenomenon in post-colonial states. This is based upon the notion that there is a “pure, homogenous, and morally upright” (Hamid, 2021, p. 2; Kachru, 2013) circle of English users. However, southern theories of language critique this form of linguistic othering that de-emphasises the personal, social and educational idiosyncrasies and nuances of English language practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2012).

English is predominantly followed as the only target language variety in Bangladesh. The textbooks taught here are found to hold the assumption that “American or British English is the most “standardised variety” (Tollefson, 2007, p.25) of target language. These values are deemed to consummate learning experiences, meanings, norms and attitudes and yield a universal competence and consciousness in learners of southern societies (Seidlhofer, 2000). Additionally, English-only values as the only means of cross-cultural understanding, epistemic recognition, practical success, linguistic effectiveness and efficiency are gaining traction through ELT curriculum and textbooks (Holliday, 2006). The curriculum and textbooks also operate in shaping Anglicised ideologies of English, i.e., upholding English as a socio-cultural meaning-making and community-building language.

These ideological constructs of ELT are embedded in a fundamental and ever functional language belief structure (van Dijk, 1998). All of them orchestrate and work for making English learning policy, material, attitude and activity as native-like as possible. Moreover, the textbooks taught

are derived predominantly from the inner circle of English and tend to enable L2 learners to acknowledge and permeate cultural meanings of Anglo-American vitality in English teaching-learning (Rashidi and Meihami, 2016). Here textbooks show the tendency to hold Anglo-American English as a universal cultural content and force (Gray, 2010). These textbooks are also shown in retaining a binary opposition through inserting native resources and ethnocentric values over non-native countries that are assumed to remain the peripheral circle of English language (Canagarajah, 1999; Holliday, 2005; Phillipson, 1992).

ELT textbooks receive much criticism for their cursory subject contents and native-speaker conventions of written and oral production. Books are written by western authors and published in Anglo-American publication houses. These aspects of ELT textbooks are usually noted to lie far away from fulfilling global learners' diverse linguistic autonomy and aspiration (Tomlinson, 2001). In southern countries like Bangladesh, native-speaker linguicism is not found to acknowledge first language competence and linguistic or cultural idiosyncrasies as a pathway for L2 learning. Hence, tertiary English learning-teaching in Bangladesh continues to be characterised by a "native speaker fallacy" (Phillipson, 1992, p.193-199) that has traditionally essentialised English, its Anglicised consciousness of prestige and its encroachments on epistemic practices (Costa, 2016).

Graduate students discover them in a cognitive vortex as they have to enroll in courses pertaining to Applied Linguistics, Socio and Psycholinguistics. The specialized knowledge and the barrage of terminologies regarding these courses seemed "Greek" to them. Most of their schooling in Bangla medium school and college in rural Bangladesh – where mindless cramming is the surefire way to succeed in English papers – proves too inadequate for them to adjust to an English-only environment at the English departments of Bangladeshi universities. Their moments of anticipation for becoming an expert in English overnight with their enrollment in an English Department at a public university meet a setback as they are exposed to such courses. Before they can cut their teeth in the English language, they wake up to a reality check in the shape of ELT and linguistics courses. They fall in what they call "a fish out of water situation". Their intellectual efforts ended with "gathering information about the people who speak it and the countries where it is spoken" (Spaine Long et al., 2013, p. iii). Despite the best of effort, they can hardly cope well with these highly specialized courses and subsequently they have to helplessly memorize the native rules and principles of oral and written English. English department students of Bangladeshi universities are seen to grapple with courses like English Phonetics and Phonology, English Morphology and Syntax, Approaches and Methods in EFL/ESL Teaching, EFL/ESL Testing, Psycholinguistics, English Language Teaching (ELT) Methods. Having no prior understanding of Applied Linguistics and creative-critical practice of English language as a social practice, students helplessly memorise the native rules and principles of oral and written English. (Alam 2021) They feel baffled and most of them cannot secure satisfactory grades in courses based on linguistics, Socio and Psycholinguistics, Discourse and Pragmatics, Stylistics and ELT. Hence, their grades also suffer due to their poor performance in English language courses. (Mortuza 2021)

### **Suggestions:**

The very pedagogical grounding of ELT that is found complicit in hindering the decolonisation and localisation of English Studies in Bangladesh should be interrogated academically. Counter-ELT discourses that can endorse an autonomous and idiosyncratic English learning and teaching in Bangladesh should be included in the curriculum. Promoting Southern Englishes in postcolonial societies like Bangladesh and erasing the linguistic stigma as well as chauvinism should be prioritised by teachers and scholars of the field. Given the fact that critical studies on ELT and tertiary English Studies have been rarely found to involve tertiary ELT textbooks and their several hegemonic assumptions. So critical research should be increased as a move to interrogate and decolonise ELT pedagogy and interrogate the neo-colonial and neo-liberal agenda aided by ELT textbooks in post-colonial countries like Bangladesh. The paper sets forth the urgency to incorporate a critical pedagogy

and pluralistic selection of textbooks that will ensure southern theories, methods and attitudes of English language. Students' mother language and their national literature should be offered more priority so that both teachers and students can find self-connectedness and self-contextualisation in their lifelong epistemic experiences. The study also expects that tertiary teachers gain academic training and disseminate a critical awareness about English language politics. Thus, the de facto ideological challenges of the current ELT in Bangladesh should be kept under critical pedagogic scrutiny. What is more is the fact that the English language should be turned into a social practice in the truly Southern pedagogic sense rather than be a perennially taken-for-granted westernised form and norm of language.

### Conclusion:

The above discussion brings the paper to the conclusion that the ELT – as practiced in Bangladesh – is fraught with Anglo-American policies, pedagogies and curriculum that has been ambitiously purported to be a salvation for all linguistic entanglements but “failed miserably when applied in Bangladesh, since its application was ill-conceived, partial, rushed and imposed by distant powers and their native informants” (Alam, 2021, p.227). ELT in Bangladesh and other Southern contexts has established matrices of phonetics and English language teaching methods that pivot on oral and written accuracy and native learning norms from the Anglo-American perspectives. This study has endeavoured to problematise ELT pedagogy and its cumulative predominance in the curriculum of English departments in Bangladeshi universities. In the main, it explores how Bangladeshi university curriculum of English Studies is entrenched in ELT-induced discourses and textbooks that precipitate a linguistic monochromatism and a parochialisation of the English studies in Bangladesh.

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