

# Original Research

## The changing role of English in Bangladesh

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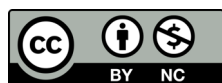
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*The importance of English as the dominant global language, the language of communication, technology, academia, economics, and entertainment is undeniable. Based on the steady economic growth throughout the country during the previous decade, Bangladesh was classified as a lower middle-income nation in a report published by the World Bank in 2016. Given these facts, it is undisputed that English plays an essential role in ensuring the continuation of economic development and the cultivation of skilled labour force that is compatible with international standards and highly demanded to meet the local needs of the employers. The purpose of this article is to situate the case of Bangladesh among other contexts of English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) with reference to the (dis)similarities between language policy and planning-related events. The article provides a detailed understanding of the language policy and planning of Bangladesh as a postcolonial society. Although Bangladesh had embraced a nationalistic approach after its independence, the discussion of this study highlighted recent changes in the English language policy initiatives in the country and the increasing use of English in different domains. The current emergence of English in Bangladesh resulted from internal and external forces, needs, and aspirations.*

**KEYWORDS:** language policy, language planning, language attitude, English as a lingua franca, English as a foreign language, Bangladesh



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

English is a common language of communication among Asian countries and, in many cases, an official language (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The significance of English in Asian countries did not emerge in a vacuum (Rahman & Pandian, 2018b). According to Crystal (2003), English is the dominant (if not the sole) language of communication, technology, academia, economics, and entertainment. Due to its increasing use in the last two decades, the status of English in various contexts has changed from English as a foreign language (EFL) to English as a lingua franca (ELF). ELF and,

at various points in history, other lingua francas such as Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Portuguese have served as contact languages used by people who do not share a common first language (Jenkins et al., 2011). English has become the lingua franca of Asia, the language of trade and commerce, and an essential skill for getting a job in many Asian countries' fastest-growing private sectors, as well as the language of research and education, where English literacy is more valuable than ever (Doan & Hamid, 2021; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Luo & Hyland, 2019; Rahman & Singh, 2021; Zainuddin et al., 2019; Rahman & Singh, 2022b). The role of ELF has

impacted the way English is taught in Asia. For example, the importance of communicating in English has resulted in a substantial reform in language policy and planning, as well as a curriculum that includes the communicative language teaching approach (Nunan, 2003). The early introduction of English was based on the idea that it is better to start learning a language at an early age (Zein, 2017). Furthermore, the widespread use of English as a medium of instruction in schools and higher education resulted in an unplanned bilingual or parallel medium of instruction (MOI) in the context of Asia (Rafi & Morgan, 2022; Rahman et al., 2021; Rahman & Singh, 2022a; Sah, 2020). Therefore, the use of English as a lingua franca or international language in society and education must be contextually analysed through critical sociolinguistic lenses.

Based on its consistent growth over the previous decade, Bangladesh was labelled as a lower middle-income country in a World Bank report published in 2016 (Rahman & Pandian, 2018a). It can be assumed that the global situation in relation to the role of English mentioned above is also relevant to the context of Bangladesh. Internal and external forces, such as economic needs and aspirations (Hamid & Rahman, 2019), technological advancement and social media (Sultana, 2014a, 2014b), the need for English-proficient graduates in the local private sector (Roshid et al., 2022), and English's dominance as the global lingua franca in higher education (Islam & Stapa, 2021; Rahman et al., 2020a) all played an important role in the growth of English in Bangladesh. The unmatched dominance of English in the contemporary global language order provides its users with several benefits in society and education, which are highlighted in language policy documents as the driving force behind prioritising English in society and education in Bangladesh (Hamid, 2022). Furthermore, despite the newly born state's initial forceful subordination of English through language policies and planning, recent educational policy reports show that English has remained a top priority at all levels of education (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014; Rahman et al., 2019a, 2019b). The use of English has gained momentum in Bangladesh, where it is widely considered a prestigious language by various segments of the population (Seargent et al., 2017). Given these circumstances, the importance of the English language in ensuring the continuation of economic expansion and the formation of a skilled labour force compatible with international standards cannot be belittled (Hamid, 2010). Despite being one of the world's largest English-speaking coun-

tries, research on the sociolinguistics of English and English education in Bangladesh has received very little attention due to low expertise among local scholars, researchers, and practitioners (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014; Rahman et al., 2020b). There is a scarcity of academic discourse that examines the adoption of macro-level language policies, which are no longer solely the prerogative of individual nations (Spolsky, 2009), but rather the state has loosened its control to determine the choice of language and allows English to function more dominantly (Hamid & Rahman, 2019), and how the role of ELF is growing and impacting society, the economy, and education. Given the gatekeeping role that English plays in the world today, it is also important to investigate the role that English language resources play in society, employment in the private sector, and education in Bangladesh, where English has been the dominant or preferred medium of instruction or communication.

The article first offers a historical account of the place of English (status planning) in education policy documents to provide a detailed understanding of the language policy and planning of Bangladesh as a post-colonial society, as well as to situate Bangladesh among other EFL and ELF contexts to discuss the (dis)similarities between the language policy and planning-related events. Following that, the current shift in the role of English as a global lingua franca in Bangladesh, as a result of the growing importance and use of the language in society and the economy, including the private sector, trade and commerce and virtual spaces has been discussed. This article concludes with a discussion from the perspective of ELF, highlighting issues from other regions where English has been used as a lingua franca, as well as the implications for language policy and planning issues in Bangladesh through critical lenses.

## 2. NATIONALISTIC PHASE OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN BANGLADESH

The legacy of British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent is at the root of the dominance of the English language in Bangladesh (Rahman & Pandian, 2018b). The Indian subcontinent became a centre for English language teaching after Macaulay's famous *Minutes on Indian Education* was published in 1835 devising a comprehensive plan to integrate English culture and language into the educational system (Rahman & Pandian, 2018b). Since then, English has been used as the official language of instruction and communication

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by both the British colonial governments of the Indian subcontinent and the independent governments of India and Pakistan. Bangladesh, which used to be called Bengal during the British era, but later became East Pakistan, also had English-language schools (Rahman & Pandian, 2018b).

It should be noted that Bangladesh had been subjected to two consecutive colonial occupations at the time of independence (Alam, 2018). As a result, the nation's policymakers had an automatic reaction to resisting any foreign language and defending Bangla, the country's dominant language. It was manifest when Bangladesh's then head of the newly formed state, the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, adopted the policy of 'one state, one language' in 1972 by amending the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh by approving Bangla as the state language via Article 3 (Rahman et al., 2019a).

Given Bangladesh's social, political, and historical circumstances, the nationalistic discourse in selecting the national language is predictable. There is no denying that the nation's predominantly monolingual identity is repeatedly emphasised in its nationalist discourses (Alam, 2018), and it was a dominant force even when Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan (as East Pakistan). However, during the period of undivided Pakistan, where multilingualism and linguistic diversity have historically been viewed as liabilities rather than assets, a similar type of monolingual language planning to elevate the status of Urdu met with strong opposition, particularly from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and other language-speaking communities (Manan et al., 2019). Even though nearly everyone in East Pakistan spoke Bangla, it was designated as a second language. This was done to lower the language's status while raising the status of Urdu. This linguistic deprivation triggered a violent outburst in East Pakistan on February 21, 1952, killing several East Pakistanis (Alam, 2018; Rahman et al., 2019a). It is not an exaggeration to say that Bangladeshis inherited their nationalistic sentiments

through their language, and this is not a post-independence phenomenon. In comparison, soon after independence, Malaysia implemented a language policy of elevating Malay to the status of the official language (Rahman & Singh, 2021). The policy of establishing a single system of national education with Malay as the medium of instruction was met with strong opposition from the socioeconomic and educational domains and it was not implemented in education until the riot of 13 May 1969 (Ali et al., 2011; Rahman & Singh, 2021). However, due to the monolingual identity of most Bangladeshis, such retaliation did not occur in Bangladesh.

As a result of the new constitutional act, the use of English in Bangladesh's official, social, and educational spheres has been restricted, while the use of Bangla, the country's official language, has been significantly elevated. On the contrary, English was used at a disproportionately higher level during the previous two colonial regimes (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014). Whether feasible or not, this policy of using more Bangla and little or no English was supposed to be implemented in all public domains (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014; Rahman et al., 2020a). As a result, most of the population of the generation after the 1970s was unable to communicate effectively in English (Alam, 2018). Furthermore, after Military Dictator General Ershad decided to use language as a negotiating tool with the country's citizens to gain their support, the situation deteriorated (Alam, 2018). He decided to reclaim control of the English language and declared that English would no longer be taught in degree colleges (Rahman et al., 2019a). According to Alam (2018), this was a significant blow to Bangladesh's already deteriorating language teaching and learning practice because the decision had an immense impact on the quality of English teachers. This is because those degree programmes were used to produce a significant number of primary and secondary school teachers. Furthermore, the decision also impacted on the quality of English teachers immensely (Rahman et al., 2019b). In the context of pre-independent and independent Bangladesh, there has been a sudden shift in the role and prestige of English.

A similar situation could be found in other colonial contexts, such as Malaysia, where proficiency in English 'brought privileges, esteem and wealth' (Hanewald, 2016, p. 183) in Malaysia and the population who could speak it during the colonial period. However, after independence, an anticolonial sentiment toward English and Malay or mother tongue-based language

policy has been elevated in various domains of language use (Rahman & Singh, 2021). This drastic and planned reduction in English results in a general lack of English use in society, as well as the language acquisition planning of English for the next generations of Malaysians, failed (Rahman et al., 2021; Rahman & Singh, 2021).

However, due to the country's postcolonial history, Kachru's (1986) model of concentric circles placed Bangladesh in the Outer Circle. However, the English language is not yet officially recognised in Bangladesh. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, from the country's independence until 1991, when democratic government was re-established, the use of English in daily life outside of the classroom was limited to elevating Bangla's status as the official language. As a result, the population of Bangladesh, according to Sultana (2017), does not use English extensively for communication, especially in rural areas. As a result, Bangladesh can be included in the Expanding Circle concept based on a concentric circle. Due to the ambiguity surrounding the status and usage of English in different domains of language in Bangladesh, it is difficult to divide the status of English into circles.

### 3. CURRENT SHIFTS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

In the last 70 years, most colonial countries in Asia have seen a frequent shift in adopting language policies and planning the language in society and education (see Gill, 2006; Rahman et al., 2021). For example, in the case of Malaysia, several policies have been taken on the status of languages in Malaysia, mainly Malay and English (Rahman & Singh, 2021; Rashid et al., 2017). However, it should be mentioned that although teaching in Bangla was related to the consolidation of national identity in Bangladesh (Hoque, 2018), the importance of English never lost relevance due to its gate-keeping power regarding global education, career opportunities, and international exchanges.

From the perspective of language policy, at the beginning of the democratic era in 1991, a steady change in English language policy and planning was evident. In 2010, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina specifically established the Education Policy Formulation Committee. The most important initiatives of this committee were to gather the opinions of people of different social classes and to draft an education policy. The committee finalised the policy in 2010. In the new policy, English was considered an integral and essential tool for

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Bangladesh's development of a knowledge-based society. Furthermore, the new policy emphasised the importance of productive English skills such as speaking and writing, from the beginning of primary education.

In addition to restoring the importance of English, the new policy made it a mandatory subject in all academic disciplines. In addition, the policy proposed to implement English as a medium of instruction (EMI) at the secondary level. The new policy recommends that English be a required subject in all post-secondary colleges and universities. The significance of translation, particularly English-to-Bangla book translations, is emphasised.

English is currently in high demand at all educational levels in the country (Rahman & Pandian, 2018a; Rahman et al., 2020a). Because of this, the two most recent language-in-education policies that Bangladesh has adopted have made clear references to the significance of English for the country and the importance of linguistic competence for its population. English is introduced to the students as early as in Class 1. This key reform is unique to Asian countries where English is spoken as a second language or foreign language. Such an early introduction to English has been adopted in many Asian countries with the view that early exposure to the language is better. For example, in Turkey, English was introduced as a compulsory subject for the whole population at all levels of education, from primary to tertiary (Kırkgöz, 2009), to address the communicative needs of learners from an early age. A similar view among stakeholders was reported in Indonesia in the study of Zein (2017).

In higher education, since English has become a need in the market, it has propelled English education together with other global educational reforms based on English. In non-native English-speaking countries, English has become the international language and lingua franca of higher education globally (Macaro et al., 2018). English learning has become a primary option

for a country like Bangladesh that aims to improve its economy by providing a skilled workforce locally and internationally, where English plays an important role (Rahman et al., 2019a, 2019b). These developments are linked to EMI in Bangladesh in private schools and universities. With the passage of the Private University Act in 1992, the federal government formalised its intention to facilitate the founding of private universities. When the idea of private universities was first conceived, there was no provision in the University Grant Commission (UGC) Act for direct or supplementary instructions regarding the language policy (Rahman et al., 2020b). However, the findings obtained from the research on the language policies that are implemented in higher education institutions show that English is the predominant language in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and medicine, whereas Bangla is the predominant language in the fields of humanities and social sciences (Rahman et al., 2020b; Hamid & Baldauf, 2014).

In public universities, it is generally accepted practice to employ a language combination consisting of English and Bangla (Hamid et al., 2013; Karim et al., 2021; Rahman & Singh, 2022a). On the other hand, the MOI policy in private universities is different because these universities have adopted EMI as part of their policy. By doing so, these universities have taken into consideration the regional needs for the supply of English-speaking graduates and have produced graduates who are capable of being internally competitive for jobs and higher studies (Rahman et al., 2020b). A parallel EMI policy has also emerged in Bangladesh to serve the elite group of Bangladesh at all educational levels (see Jahan & Hamid, 2019; Rahman & Singh, 2022a; Rahman et al., 2020a, 2020b). It is also important to note that this expansion of EMI in higher education has a top-down impact on the school system, where English-medium schools are growing rapidly to equip students with English and prepare them better for higher studies and the job market (Jahan & Hamid, 2019).

This growing use of English, perhaps, is an indication of the sociolinguistic and educational evolution of English in Bangladesh as the language of international influence and communication, which was absent in the past few decades due to the strong nationalistic sentiment in language policy. This shift in approach towards English as a medium of instruction or teaching English as a compulsory subject is highly influenced by the global order of English and growing economic interest at that time. Communicative competence in English had become essential to supply the skilled workforce in

the private sector and to cope with the technological revolution of that time. During the nineties and the beginning of this century, such a changing wind of English was evident in other contexts as well. For example, in Indonesia, English has become the MOI of several schools and universities (Pritasari et al., 2019).

The case study by Pritasari et al. (2019) revealed the interlink between the utility of English in the job sector and the adoption of EMI in an Asian business school. Rahman and Singh (2022a) reported an identical finding in their study in the context of Malaysia, where participants from an English-medium programme explicitly pointed out the importance of English in securing a job. Communicative competence in English has been found to play a crucial role in the development of skilled personnel.

#### **4. THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE AND USE OF ENGLISH IN BANGLADESH**

The significance of learning English was piercingly articulated by not only the people in the urban population but also the common people of rural Bangladesh (Seargeant et al., 2017). In the study by Seargeant et al. (2017) participants from rural areas highlighted that the knowledge of English is a powerful tool that would give the future generation the freedom to act on their own, and the lack of it inhibits people's capabilities and contributes to their lack of agency. A similar situation could be observed in the case of Pakistan, where English is assumed to be the passport to a better life, higher studies, a job, and social status (Haidar & Fang, 2019).

In the workplaces, largely private sector, graduates with strong English backgrounds are highly demanded. In one of the earlier studies, Banu and Sussex (2001) examined the spoken and business uses of code-switched English in Bangladeshi society, despite the linguistic maintenance of Bangla by the nation. The reason behind the desire for English is forced by the necessity in the economic market locally and globally. It has become widely accepted that the lingua franca of international business is English and has been termed the business ELF (BELF) (see Jenkins et al., 2011). The use of English in business in Bangladesh is evident in the study by Rashid et al. (2017), who explored how non-native English-speaking business personnel in Bangladesh use English extensively as their medium of communication while interacting with both native and non-native speakers in various countries. They also indicated the growing social interaction, often through the exchange of email in English, which carries the features of BELF,

which has become a popular communication medium in global business settings. Such uses of English document that ELF in Bangladesh gained momentum simultaneously since the prestige, utility, and use of English are high.

See Table 1 for the current situation and demand for English in the job sector of Bangladesh. (This data was generated from a larger study and the advertisements were searched using keywords such as English communication; verbal and written English; reading

and writing English on the largest online job site, bdjobs.com). Numerous sectors in the job listings were found to demand English as a mandatory requirement for getting a job. This situation is similar to Malaysia and Vietnam. In Malaysia, through the content analysis of the job advertisement, the study by Pillai and Ong (2018) revealed that English was explicitly mentioned as the desired candidate for jobs in business and sciences noting a sharp increase in the demand for English-speaking graduates.

Table 1  
*English language requirement in job advertisement*

ENGLISH LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS STATEMENTS	JOB SECTOR
Excellent oral, written, English communication skills	Engineer/Architect
It goes without saying that a person applying for the job must be fluent in English	Marketing/Sales
Good knowledge of English and local language	Driving
Reading and writing in English fluently	Banking
Candidate should have excellent verbal English communication skills	Driving
Good command on spoken & written English	Garments/Textile
English communication skill must be international grade	Human resources
English communication skill must be good otherwise no need to send resume	Human resources
Have a good command in writing and speaking English	Medical/Pharma
Strong communication skill in English and Bengali	Secretary/Receptionist

Another major factor that may be related to the rapid growth of language use in society is the influence of English as a language of technology, particularly on social media sites. ELF does not refer to a single, uniform variation of English, but rather to a social practice centred on meaning-making processes. As a result, as Sultana (2017) points out, ELF is not geographical locations, such as countries from the inner, outer, and expanding circles, which, according to Cogo (2010, 2012), may occur in the virtual space due to the spread of human interaction on social networks.

Based on the potential of virtual space as a context of lingua franca (see Canagarajah, 2007) in the context of Bangladesh, Sultana (2014a; 2017) explored the English language practice of young adults in Bangladesh. In

the study by Sultana (2014a), young adults from a Bangladeshi university use linguistic and semantic forms of both English and Bangla creatively, strategically, and pragmatically to bring diversity to Bangla not only from English but also from different genres of discourse by transgressing the boundaries of the language. One of her more recent studies called the sociolinguistic situation of Bangladeshi young adults in virtual spaces as ELF users and argued the importance of viewing English with other semiotic resources in meaning-making (Sultana, 2017). The creative use of language by young adults in transgressing the boundaries of language, culture, and locality questions the appropriateness of terming them as EFL/ESL speakers because of their rootedness in the expanding circle according to

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the Kachruvian paradigms of three concentric circles. The situated use of English in Bangladesh in the virtual sphere also highlights the issue that English is no longer the sole property of native speakers. Such creative use of language by young adults in transgressing the boundaries of language, culture, and locality constructed their identity as a World Englishes speakers and increased the functionality of ELF in the context of Bangladesh. Therefore, English in Bangladesh can be claimed as a southern language (Hamid, 2022), since the conceptualisation of the southern language represents the *'creative and meaningful ways of using English regardless of its formal properties, highlighting the plurality, multiplicity, and localness of English in a globalised world'* (Hamid, 2022, p. 3).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article discussed the situation of English in Bangladesh in light of a conceptual analysis of the issues and related instances from other contexts. Since independence, there has been a nationalistic approach to language policy and planning that has been adopted to preserve the mother tongue, Bangla. In this situation, the most important question to answer is whether or not those in charge of running the country and responsible for policy adoption and implementation want the country to have a language policy that is both comprehensive and practical.

However, policymakers in Bangladesh have recently recognised the importance of English in education which is evident in their recent language policy recommendations. In the most recent language policy in 2010, the policy documents reveal a major shift from a Bangla-based language policy recommendation to a more English-friendly one informed by the role of English as the global lingua franca (Hamid & Rahman, 2019). Furthermore, the role and use of English in various domains of language in Bangladesh have begun to

grow, including everyday conversations, education, workplaces, and virtual spaces. However, in the case of Bangladesh, policy adoption necessitates extensive planning, which did not occur.

The relationship between the English language and economic development is not always linear, such notion has been questioned by the researchers from global south, including Bangladesh (Ali, 2022; Ali & Hamid, 2022; Chowdhury, 2022). Many countries around the world have achieved economic success despite using little to no English (Phillipson, 2018). According to Phillipson (2018), when referring to India's language policy, the spread of English through these projects is a new form of imperialism through various wings, such as the British Council.

The popular rhetoric about the benefits of learning English for a country and an individual to compete in the modern, globalised economy (see Batthacharya, 2013) has created unhealthy competition among learners and their parents. The phenomenon was explained by 'linguistic capital' (Bourdieu, 1992), which discusses the relationship between language and power as well as the role of language in placing people with different linguistic repertoires in different social hierarchies (see Sah & Li, 2018, 2020). Since the aforementioned international organisation plays a parallel role in Bangladesh and influences policymaking (see Karim et al., 2018), these issues must be questioned and challenged immediately in the context of Bangladesh.

The scenario of English as the preferred language is reflected in the much-discussed trend of English as a global language (see Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996) and Asia's lingua franca (see Kirkpatrick, 2012). However, lingua franca needs to address the issue of the 'sustainability of language' (García, 2011, p. 7), which would bring a balance between the mother tongue and ELF in the context of implementation. Canagarajah (1999) has critically positioned himself on this matter: *'The powerless in post-colonial communities may find ways to negotiate, alter, oppose political structures, and reconstruct their languages, cultures, and identities to their advantage. The intention is not to reject English, but to reconstitute it in more inclusive, ethical, and democratic terms'* (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 27). In line with what Canagarajah (1999) indicated, while Bangladesh has prioritised access to English for all stakeholders at all levels of education (see Sultana, 2014b; Rahman et al., 2019a), and there is an increasing belief in the relationship between English and social status, job, and opportunity in higher education, there

is still an issue of equal dissemination of English. In particular, the access policy is one dilemma that may result in a disproportionate status for English as a linguistic capital (see Bourdieu, 1992). English must be equally distributed throughout the population if it is to be effective. In contrast, as previously stated, a subset of elites who attend English-medium schools and universities (see Jahan & Hamid, 2019) have a distinct education and class-based identity that distinguishes them from the identity of a Bangladeshi (Sultana, 2014a, 2014b), should be challenged.

The practical premise of the article is to emphasise the importance of giving every citizen equal access to English as a lingua franca because it is considered ben-

eficial to the country's development (Rahman & Pandian, 2018a, 2018b). It is essential to maintain consistency among policies when it comes to language policy adaptation. There is no denying that Bangladesh has a rich history tied to its language, and the country is proud of it (see Albury, 2016 for the impact of national ideology on language policy).

However, the existence of English as a global language in today's globalised world is a reality. The importance of English in people's lives has never been greater than it is in today's globalised world. As a result, it is critical to have a balanced language policy that preserves and nurtures mother tongues (Bangla and other indigenous languages).

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