

Impact of Bangla Language on English Language Learning of the Undergraduate Students of Dhaka University

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Abstract

The study looks into the academic impacts of the Bangla language on English language learning by Dhaka University (DU) undergraduate students. The difficulties they faced in learning through the English medium and the possible solution to these difficulties were also explored in the study. Respondents (Eight), selected purposively from four departments of DU, were interviewed to collect data in this regard. The findings revealed some positive impacts of Bangla on the learning of English in respect of reading, writing, and listening. However, most of the learners needed help with speaking in English. Students found it difficult to learn through the English medium due to problems including a lack of vocabulary, limited speaking practice scope in secondary and higher secondary levels, lack of grammatical understanding, and lack of confidence in speaking in English. Respondent also gave some possible solutions to these difficulties, which needed the attention of the teachers and policymakers.

Keywords: Foreign Language (L2), Language learning, Academic Problems.

Introduction

The impact of the first language (L1) on the foreign language (L2) is a rising research factor worldwide. Language has four primary skills in the academic area: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Many researchers researched the impact of L1 on the different skills of L2, and they found a significant impact of L1 on L2 speaking (Fatem et al., 2012); reading (Artieda, 2017); and writing (Karim & Nassaji, 2013). Learning a foreign language, English, in Bangladesh depends on some variables. English is a widely used foreign language in Bangladesh and is considered an essential medium for communication in daily life. The widespread and versatile use of English strengthens the demand for its transformation from a foreign language to a second language (Ara, 2020). For academic purposes, Dhaka University (DU)

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students have to be familiar with English. However, most of them received secondary and higher secondary education in the Bangla version. In this situation, local students sometimes feel like foreign students even if they study in their home country (Jewels & Albon, 2012). Due to the usage of L2 in-class lectures and academic materials, students could not fully realize their potential and treat themselves as foreign students at their local institutions. In the public Universities of Bangladesh, where most of the books are taught in English, students often try to respond in L2 and face many problems.

Significance and rationale of the study

Significance of the study: The study will provide insight into how the Bangla language affects academic performance in the four English language abilities of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In a country like Bangladesh, where Bangla is the dominant language and its impact on English is very significant. In addition to highlighting the difficulties DU students had while studying through L2, the paper also emphasized the impacts of L1 on L2 that they experienced. Additionally, this paper included their recommendations for solving problems they identified and explained how Bangla might be utilized to help students learn through English medium.

Rationale of the study: As language learning is a process of habit formation, it is challenging for a learner to practice L2, where Bangla is the dominant language. Because of the educational system of Bangladesh, most students in higher education find it difficult to communicate academically in English because instruction in secondary and higher secondary levels is conducted in Bangla. The most significant drawbacks in secondary education in meeting the demand of second language learners in Bangladesh are, to put it another way, a variety of obstacles, such as a lack of training and assistance, the absence of proper and consistent advice to ELT teachers (Islam, 2003), test-driven instruction was used by teachers (Sultana, 2019), and the inability to materialization of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method (Rahman et al., 2018). Correspondingly, English, taught by incompetent teachers, undoubtedly proves useless to students who want to pass tests or adapt to the language (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Therefore, when DU undergraduate students opt for higher education, they cannot generally adapt to L2 and often go through some academic problems. In the study, what sort of academic impacts Bangla has on English learning of the undergraduate students of DU have been explored and set as the aim of the study. This aim leads to the following research questions for the study:

1. Does the first language (Bangla) play any role in learning a foreign language (English) for students of DU?

2. What sort of academic difficulties do they have while learning through the English medium?
3. What are the ways of overcoming these difficulties?

Review of literature

Hipfner-Boucher et al. (2014) conducted a study on the effects of L1, or any other language, on the L2 (English language) of Chinese-speaking children, and the results suggested that instead of delaying the development of English language skills, knowing French or Chinese languages can develop better English literacy skills among the children. Moreover, students receiving instruction in L2 achieved high-level efficiency in L1 and L2 without sacrificing the academic result of other subjects (Lazaruk, 2007). In a similar study, Clarkson (2006) investigated the advantages of other subject skills because of L2 acquisition and found that bilingual students had better skills in Mathematics than monolingual students. Therefore, students who received instruction in L2 had better mental flexibility and creativity (Lazaruk, 2007). A study revealed that older students admitted to the Mandarin-English immersion program performed better academically in subjects like mathematics and science than those enrolled in only English-centered programs (Padilla et al., 2013). Another study by Vega (2014) suggested that having classroom lectures in L2 positively affected L2 learners' performance in main academic courses along with Mathematics, Science, and Language arts. Gebauer et al. (2013) looked into the connection between the L1 (German) and L2 (English) reading skills of students and exposed that a partial immersion program had a positive impact on the improvement of reading competence for both languages. In a study, Nation (2003) stated though the impact of a first language on a second language is not vast, it plays a significant role in delivering meaning and content. In the opposite direction, Hussien (2014) investigated the impact of learning English (L2) on learning Arabic language (L1), and his finding revealed that L2 learning is positively affected by students' L1 spelling and reading competence. However, the influence of L1 on L2 depends on their shared and unique characteristics (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Among the four English language skills, writing is the most complicated task for Thai university students, as syntactic and semantic knowledge is needed for writing skills (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). A quick literature review reveals two things: First, improved adequacy with L1 leads to better adequacy with L2. Second, the academic performance of other disciplines can be enhanced by L2 acquisition. The studies mentioned above indicated that students had impacts of L1 on

receiving instructions in L2. However, they showed little or no evidence of the impact of L1 in tertiary-level students who switched from L1 settings at the higher secondary level to L2 settings at the tertiary level. Hence, the main aim of this study was to identify the academic impacts of L1 (Bangla) on L2 (English) among undergraduate students of DU. It would examine the advantages and disadvantages of L1 (Bangla) on L2 (English) they received. Lastly, it would provide some solutions given by them for overcoming the problems with learning L2.

Research Methodology

This study followed the qualitative method consisting of open-ended questions to offer a detailed description of this study problem. The qualitative approach allowed the participants to express their attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and beliefs thoroughly. This study was conducted within the Dhaka University area among the undergraduate students of DU. The data collection procedure followed a simple purposive sampling. As a consequence, eight (8) students from four (4) different Departments - English Language, Japanese Language and Culture (JFL), Psychology, and Institute of Education and Research (IER) were chosen, four men and four women in total. These Departments were chosen as they had compulsory English subjects in their academic program. The average age of the respondents was 22 years, and they were studying in the third and fourth year of a 4-year honours program. As a consequence, the researcher took eight semi-structured interviews for the study. Open-ended questions comprised of three sections were applied in the face-to-face interviews.

The interviews aimed to collect data about students' feelings and experiences related to the academic impact of Bangla on English. Section 1 asked if the first language (Bangla) positively impacted their learning of a foreign language (English). Section 2 addressed the academic difficulties they faced while learning through the English medium. Section 3 contained one question about their opinions on getting rid of the difficulties they encountered while learning through the English medium. Applying open-ended questions and getting the participants involved in one-to-one interviews helped the researcher record the data and observe the feelings and experiences of the students about the benefits and difficulties of L1 over L2 and find solutions to these problems. One researcher personally took the interviews with the respondents. All the interviews were recorded, and notes were taken for data analysis. After collecting the data from the participants, each student was given a pseudonym. Later, all the interviews were transcribed and analyzed concerning the research questions by the researchers. Before collecting the data, permission was taken from the students whether they wanted to do it.

The researchers anticipated that they did not have any minimal impact when participating in the study, which was entirely voluntary.

Findings and discussion

The objective of the study was to investigate the impact of mother language on the foreign language of the students of the Dhaka University. The respondents were mainly asked three (3) questions to accomplish the goal of this study.

Research question 01: Does the first language (Bangla) play any role in learning a foreign language (English) for students of DU?

Respondent 1 from the Department of English Language said that he received help from his native language, Bangla while acquiring the four skills of L2 (English). He said,

Bangla is the source of my understanding, and English is the cover of that source.

He found reading very useful in learning through the English medium with the help of Bangla:

When I read any articles in the American or British style and of different countries' writers, reading seems very difficult because of the usage of advanced vocabulary. In that case, I receive the help of L1 to find the meaning of those vocabularies in L2. It is a great help for me to learn L2.

Respondent 4, from the Department of JFL, made a similar comment, adding that Bangla helped him a great deal in reading:

When I try to read academic writings in English, I face some difficulties in vocabulary. For that reason, I have been keeping English-to-Bangla dictionaries with me since the higher-secondary level.

In a study, Taki and Namy Soghady (2013) examined the contribution of L1 transfer of Iranian EFL students in L2 idiom comprehension. The idioms of L2 were classified into indistinguishable, alike, and various kinds of categorization based on their resemblance to L1 Persian. The study revealed that learners of different levels mostly adopted word-by-word translation to decipher indistinguishable, alike, and other items. However, in a study, Sabzalipour (2012) discovered that Persian-English dictionaries assisted participants in completing tasks resulting in uncomfortable and inaccurate translations.

Respondent 4 mentioned further that L1 helped him write in L2:

Initially, I tried to memorize phrases and paragraphs in English without knowing their meaning in Bangla. As a result, I forgot them quickly and used to cut a poor figure in the examinations. However, when I tried to find the Bangla meaning, I could remember and write them quickly in the tests.

Respondent 3 from the Department of JFL stated that L1 helped him write any topic in L2:

When I try to write any topic in English, I first think about it in Bangla and then translate it into English. It is a great help for me to write in L2 by thinking in Bangla at first. Nevertheless, there remained some grammar or vocabulary mistakes in my writing.

Similar to this finding, L1 interference was also discovered by Bhela (1999) among the candidates from four individual countries for writing down stories explaining the pictures. Their writing was differentiated based on nine kinds of errors caused by L1; those are- 1) Apostrophe, 2) Punctuation, 3) Spelling, 4) Prepositions, 5) Capital letters, 6) Present and past continuous tenses, 7) Subject pronouns, 8) vocabulary, and 9) Passive and active voice.

In a similar vein, respondent 5, from the Psychology Department stated:

I am very weak at reading and writing any topic in English; for example- most of the time, I cannot understand any questions written in English in the exam. I can write them in L2 with the help of L1 only when I can understand the meaning of those questions in the exam.

Respondent 3 from the Department of Japanese noted that the grammar of L1 helped him acquire the grammar of L2:

If we are good at first language, it will also help us enhance our ability to learn other languages. If we do not know the grammar of L1 properly, how can we grasp the grammar of a second language? When I learn articles, morphology, and syntax in L2, I seek help from those in L1.

Respondent 1, from the English Language Department, made similar comments about the morphological help of L1 in L2:

Well, when I was a second-year student in a course called "Morphology" L1 helped me very much in learning the morphology of L2; for example- in both L1 and L2, pronouns, which is the subject of the sentence, use nominative case like 'I already did that' or 'Will you please stop making that noise?'.

Respondent 1 further expressed his view regarding sentence formation by expressing:

I maintained the sentence formation (subject+verb+agreement) with the help of L1 to write the target language and expression or any sound pronunciation.

It can be said that Bangla, in most cases, helps the students acquire sentence formation/structure in a given context, expression, and also the sound/pronunciation of L2. Moreover, there are similarities between Bangla and English phonemics. Bangla and English have voiced vowel sounds; for example, æ/, /a i u ɔ/. In addition, Bangla and English have sixteen consonants in common; for example- /p b t d k g s ʃ n m ŋ r l w j h/ (Barman, 2009). In another study, Ringbom (1992) stated similar results about overt transfer in lexical, phonological, and morphological or grammatical items. His investigation found that L2 learner is facilitated with overt transfer when there are similarities between L2 input and potential L1 -based knowledge.

Respondent 2 from the English Language Department stated that L1 assisted him in listening:

In the first year, as a medium of instruction in the class, I encountered some teachers using Bangla instead of English. As a result, I understood most of the terms and grasped the main ideas of my course's contents, which my teacher tried to make me understand..

Likewise, respondent 6, from the Psychology Department said that L1 helped her understand reading and listening in class:

In the class, when I cannot understand any difficult article written in L2 or any lectures delivered in L2, I ask the teachers to translate them into Bangla for my better understanding.

Respondent 1 from the English Language Department said that Bangla contributed a lot to practicing speaking in L2:

When I try to converse with my friends, seniors, and teachers, I convert ideas of L1 into L2 with the help of L1.

Likewise, respondent 3, from the Department of JFL said:

In the first year, I tried to grasp the meaning of English conversations from the first-year English course to increase my communication by using L1.

Respondent 7 from the IER added:

Since I was not skilled in speaking in L2 initially, I tried to deliver my speech by switching to L1 sometimes.

Research question 02: What academic difficulties do they have while learning through the English medium?

Respondent 1 from the English Language Department noted that he found listening and speaking skills the toughest:

When I came to university, I faced many problems understanding the class lectures in English. The reason was that the medium of instruction in the class was entirely in English. Moreover, since I was not good at speaking in L2 at the higher secondary level, I struggled to communicate with friends, classmates, seniors, and teachers. Still, now, I have the same problem.

Respondent 6 from the Psychology Department made similar comments about listening and speaking:

In the first year, I could not understand the lectures delivered in English, let alone could write them down in L2. At first, I felt anxious or less motivated to learn English. Even I hesitated to ask anything to my seniors and teachers in L2.

Respondent 1 from the English Language Department further stated that he considered reading very tough for lack of vocabulary:

The toughest English words are not acceptable to L2 learners at the beginning. When I read the native British/American articles, I find them very much hard to comprehend. For that reason, I apply a technique that paraphrases the idea of those articles.

Likewise, respondent 7, from the IER, mentioned:

At the very beginning, in reading and writing, my vocabularies were not much enriched; I used to receive help from Bangla or Google translate. Now, I have gradually improved. So, when I look for advanced English words, I seek help from English-to-English dictionaries.

She added:

In reading, the understanding of any article depends on the level of the writer he/she is. If the writing is very difficult, I find the reading very tough.

She further said:

In writing, I do not have that much difficulty in the area of sentence formation/structure or pronunciation. However, I used to write informal /nonstandard English sentences in writing.

Respondent 6 from the Psychology Department commented about writing:

I have been dealing with academic matters in Bangla since the beginning of school. That is why my knowledge of vocabulary in L2 has not developed yet. Even now, I have difficulties writing long sentences in L2. Besides, in the exam, I cannot write the answers to the questions in an organized way in English when I wish to write more in L2. Whatever I learned for the exam in L2, I forgot quickly.

Respondent 7 from the IER believed that if she wanted to increase her speaking skill in English, it was vital for her to talk in natural/practical situations so that her vocabulary and sentences were built up in a natural process.

When I choose topics for discussions in English and start communicating with my friends from other universities, we want to talk only about those topics and do not tend to talk about other things.

She added that the reasons behind our sticking to limited boundaries of topics were the lack of spontaneity in speaking in L2 and the fear due to their conscious efforts to translate their thoughts from L1 to L2.

Respondent 6 from the Psychology Department mentioned difficulties in listening because of the variation in accent:

When the teachers communicated in English with a British/American accent or said anything in a Bangla tone in the class, I was very much confused about what accents she should follow.

Respondent 7 from the IER added her problem with speaking in L2:

I speak English in my native tone, which is Bangla.

Research question 03: What are the ways of overcoming these difficulties?

Respondents recommended the following suggestion to overcome academic problems faced in learning through L2 (English):

- There are four areas in English: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. For listening and speaking, as the communication part, the instructions should be in L1 (Bangla) for beginners, as almost 90% of the students come from the Bangla version. Teachers should assist the students in

comprehending the material and identifying any similarities, complications, and other aspects. However, reading and writing should be done in English since these abilities enable students to advance.

- In order to overcome the fear of learning L2, they need self-motivation, willingness to learn, and self-confidence. All these should be adequately emphasized. In addition, the participant said they should avoid code-switching; for example- when they speak in English or Bangla, it should be entirely in either Bangla or English. Wesely (2012) gave a similar suggestion. His research found that how well a second language learner will learn L2 depends on their confidence and perspective towards L2.
- The students, who are Bangla-speaking, have a fair amount of acculturation to reading and writing tasks they performed in schools. On the other hand, they need to work on their speaking and listening abilities because they do not have the scope to practice these. As a result, since these skills are required for postsecondary education, consistent practice should begin at the beginning of our schooling.
- Motivation is considered a precondition and essential factor in getting students involved in learning. The more motivated students are, the more likely the intended learning outcome will be achieved. However, learning refers to students' involvement and making students acquire healthy academic results (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Therefore it is essential to motivate the students to learn L2.
- Students must put in much effort and use both Bangla and English to assist them in overcoming the challenges of acquiring L2. Besides, they need their attempt to learn L2; for example- by increasing their vocabulary and writing to avoid grammar mistakes in English.
- One of the interviewees stated that at the primary level, it is better not to make the students memorize the passages or any academic articles in English for reading and writing. However, creating an environment for them to adapt to L2 would be more effective.
- Another participant thought that if they have to learn English, it should be taught intensely/religiously from childhood. Secondly, at the secondary and tertiary levels, English needs to be taught naturally; for instance- in Direct method (DM)/Communicative language teaching (CLT). Thirdly, they should be kept motivated to learn in L2.
- The prominence of the language club at the university should be increased, and the Department should encourage students to join the club. Language professionals should supervise the sessions for learning English. Pronunciation and speaking fluency need to be given special consideration.

Conclusion

There is no denying that the mother tongue is the best medium for a learner to learn anything. So, there is and will always be the impact of L1 on L2. It could be both positive and negative. A student cannot avoid adopting L2 since English is an international language that offers learners opportunities and advantages. Initially, to learn in L2, the instruction in the class should be in the native language to create a comfortable zone for a learner. After that, the learners need to be gradually taken into the natural process of learning L2 to adapt to the language subconsciously and without any anxiety. In order to create that environment, both the endeavor of the learners for learning through L2 and the government policy is needed to improve the education system in our country.

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