

# A Local Intellectual History of TESOL

Commentary on

*The Routledge Handbook of English Language Education in Bangladesh*  
(2021)

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## Introduction

In the context of Bangladesh, there was an absence of a comprehensive narrative of the intellectual history and the range of the TESOL discipline. *The Routledge handbook of English language education in Bangladesh* (hereafter, *the handbook*), an edited volume, fills out this gap. The handbook comprises six thematically organized sections. Excluding the introduction and the conclusion, the handbook contains 25 chapters. In these chapters, the handbook critically reviews the history of ELT in Bangladesh, identifies the pitfalls in language education policy reform initiatives, detects the limitations of assessment practices, and explores the connection between the English language and the masses. The contents of the handbook will be useful for TESOL educators, students, policymakers, educational administrators, and industry stakeholders.

Due to skill deficits, lack of adequate training in academic research, and weak connections with the global academia, a huge number of TESOL academics either publish in local journals or in predatory outlets. Hence, for the TESOL researchers based in Bangladesh, this

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handbook marks a shift in the dissemination modality of research output. In other words, since this handbook has been published by a reputed international publisher (i.e. Routledge), the data and theorization from Bangladesh will get a global reach.

In this article, I present my review of the handbook in four sections. In the first section, I briefly summarize the chapters and offer a commentary on the contents of the handbook. In the second section, I assess the utility value of the book chapters. In the third section, I discuss the historical shift in TESOL research in the context of Bangladesh with reference to the chapters in the handbook. Finally, I register a caveat for the readers to help them avoid ideological bias.

### **The Substance**

The first section of the handbook (History, language-in-education policy, and planning in Bangladesh) examines the problems of language education policy and planning in Bangladesh. Shakila Nur, Megan Short, and Greg Ashman (Chapter 2 in Section I) critically evaluate the history of English language education policy in Bangladesh. This chapter offers a guideline for the policymakers to effectively manage reform initiatives. Tania Rahman, in Chapter 3, contends that the difficulty of the language education policy in Bangladesh originates from the quandary in relation to the affective attachment with the state language (i.e. Bangla) and the desire for economic mobility. To deal with the dilemma in language education policy, the author presents a bi-/multilingual education policy based on the conception of 'language-as-resource'. The language education policy stakeholders will be able to draw insights from this chapter. In Chapter 4, Hamidur Rahman reviews the history of English language teaching methodology from the 18<sup>th</sup> century British India to 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporary Bangladesh. The spatio-temporal description of ELT methods and instructional materials in this chapter will benefit TESOL educators and researchers.

Whereas Section I illustrates the macro history of ELT in Bangladesh, Section II demonstrates how the policies and theories are

translated and experienced in the micro contexts. In Chapter 5, Rizwanul Huq, through conversation analysis, shows the enactment of *de facto* English-only policy in the classroom of an English version school in Bangladesh. Chapter 6 is a vigorous quantitative study on the effect of textual enhancement of input in English language teaching. Based on the findings, the authors (Akhter Jahan and Subramaniam Govindasamy) suggest that the use of textual enhancement will be effective in grammar teaching in the context of Bangladesh. Md Golam Jamil and Kazi Mafizur Rahman, in Chapter 7, examine the prospect of research-based academic English education in the universities in Bangladesh. This mixed method research indicates that the new model for teaching academic English can be contextually adapted and implemented. Thus, Section II encourages evidence-based practice in TESOL education.

Section III (Assessment and testing in ELT) identifies the limitations of the testing system in the national education system in Bangladesh. For example, the mixed-method study of Rubina Khan (in Chapter 8) demonstrates the harmful backwash effects of the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations, the two high-stakes national tests in Bangladesh. The findings of this research unveil that “Bangladeshi education system operates in an exam-oriented culture, and examinations dominate teaching and learning” (p. 125). In Chapter 9, Sabrin Farooqui, in her case study, explores the missing link between the new English textbook (in use since 2002) and the teaching in the classroom. This disjuncture originates from the test-obsession of the stakeholders in Bangladesh, leading to poor quality education and learning. The quantitative study in Chapter 10 (Md. Zulfeqar Haider, Robiul Kabir Chowdhury, and Jack B. Holbrook) shows that the validity and reliability of Secondary School Certificate (SSC) English First Paper test items is low. This chapter offers valuable insights for the test developers. The major strength of Section III is the quantitative analysis.

Section IV (Teaching English language versus literature) exhibits the cross-disciplinary spirit of the handbook. In Chapter 11, for example, Shamsad Mortuza maintains that the horizon of English studies

(both TESOL and literature) in Bangladesh should be expanded to respond to the needs of the automation economy and artificial intelligence supported society. Mashrur Shahid Hossain, in Chapter 12, argues for the inclusion of literary texts in language teaching textbooks. Chapter 13 is antithetical to the ideas presented in Chapter 12. In particular, Mian Md. Naushaad Kabir in Chapter 13, through a robust analysis of *English for Today: Classes XI-XII* (published in 2015 by the National Curriculum & Textbook Board of Bangladesh), exposes the myths pertaining to the benefits of using literature in the language classroom. Based on the findings of his analysis, Kabir contends that “the idea of using literature in LT needs to adhere to the learner-centred communicative approach. If innovation in teaching does not conform to learner-centredness, the use of literature in a communicative curriculum becomes self-contradictory and counter-productive” (p. 215). He recommends that literary texts should be prudently selected for language teaching. In chapter 14, Asif Kamal, in a mixed research, identifies the positive impact of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) in literature classes. From the chapters included in Section IV (especially Chapters 13 and 14) TESOL textbook writers will be able to draw insights for designing instructional materials.

Section V (Language learning and construction of identity) explores the link between the English language and society in the context of Bangladesh. The analysis of Iffat Jahan in Chapter 15 shows how the medium of instruction constitutes collective identity. To be specific, in the discursive sites, the English medium students are represented as elites and Bangla medium students are portrayed as inferior. In the same vein, Shaila Sultana’s study in Chapter 16 demonstrates how the identity of English medium and Bangla medium students is manufactured through discursive interactions. In Chapter 17, Saima Akter digs into the perceptions of Bangladeshi young adults about the association between English pronunciation and social class. These chapters will help TESOL educators understand the embeddedness of the English language in the lives of the students.

In the study of Mahmud Hasan Khan and Shaila Sultana (Chapter 18), the students of a private university in Bangladesh expressed their preference for EMI (English Medium Instruction). Chapter 19 reflects the critical spirit of TESOL. In her content analysis, Afroza Aziz Suchana locates gender bias in the illustrations, images, and language in the Grade V English textbook published in 2017 by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) of Bangladesh. In Chapter 20, Kakali Chowdhury and M. Moninoor Roshid expose the identity confusion of government college teachers of English in Bangladesh. Chapter 21 is rooted in anthropological tradition. To be specific, in his autoethnography, M. Obaidul Hamid critically reflects on his journey from Bangladesh to Australia as a TESOL educator.

Section VI (Teacher education and English for economic development) deals with the issues of TESOL teacher development and the contribution of English language to economic advancement. Chapter 22, the first chapter of section VI, is an informative study on the contribution of English language teacher associations (LTAs) to teacher development in the South Asian context. Chapter 23 is an autoethnographic study where Anwar Ahmed discusses the relevance of social justice in English language teacher education. Md. Maksud Ali and M. Obaidul Hamid, in Chapter 24, discuss the role of English in human capital development in the context of Bangladesh. In Chapter 25, M. Moninoor Roshid, based on the findings of a qualitative research, asserts that mutual intelligibility (instead of native-like pronunciation) is a crucial factor for international communication in the ready-made garments business. Qumrul Hasan Chowdhury and Elizabeth J. Erling, in Chapter 26, disclose that rural communities in Bangladesh view English as a tool for economic development. In other words, competence in English helps them fight against structural inequality.

### **Utility Value**

This handbook is a valuable addition to the scholastic history of TESOL in Bangladesh. The chapters in the book will benefit researchers, teacher educators, students, and policymakers. Specifically, TESOL researchers

will be able to develop research agendas from this handbook. The teacher educators will find the book chapters useful in undergraduate and graduate-level TESOL courses. For example, Section III (Assessment and testing in ELT) can be used in the ‘language testing and evaluation’ course offered to pre-service teachers of English. In addition, the handbook will serve as a valuable resource for the research methodology classrooms of TESOL programs. Since the handbook demonstrates the application of a wide spectrum of research methodology, trainee researchers will be able to recognize the rigor and epistemological breadth of the TESOL discipline.

The university administration, industry leaders, and policymakers in Bangladesh are unaware of the intellectual and practical contributions of TESOL researchers. In the collective memory of the educational administrators in Bangladesh, English language teachers are stored as a community who teach only basic grammar and paragraph writing. In other words, the educational management is incognizant of the latest epistemological status of TESOL. The perception of the policy makers and the academic managers heavily affects the flow of research funding to TESOL departments in the universities in Bangladesh. In addition, the narrow positioning of the English language educators damages the self-esteem of the pre-service teachers. This handbook will serve as a collective bargaining manual to negotiate resource distribution with the educational and industry administration.

One interesting feature of this handbook is that the editors of the handbook are not ideologically biased; instead, they encourage dialogical practice. For instance, the handbook includes the views of the ‘linguistic imperialism’ enthusiasts and the perspectives of those who contend that English is a tool for economic development. As an illustration, Chapter 18 (Mahmud Hasan Khan and Shaila Sultana) carries an anti-English sentiment. The design of this chapter is rooted in the ideas constructed by the theorists of English linguistic imperialism. The authors identified English as an obstacle to intellectual growth and meaningful learning experiences. They maintain:

Within a world of economic order when service industries in many countries, including Bangladesh, have thrived to a maximum level, the ‘comprador bourgeois’ class and their agents tend to establish a more intimate relation with foreign education providers and the associated language, that is, English instead of the national language Bangla (p. 286).

Such ideologically triggered views have potentials to generate confusions among uninformed readers. Therefore, a stabilizer was required in the handbook. The balance is offered in Section VI (Teacher education and English for economic development). In this section, contrary to the beliefs of the ‘linguistic imperialism’ zealots, English language is viewed as an instrument for technology, transnationalism, and globalization. This ‘development’ viewpoint discards the ‘linguistic imperialism’ viewpoint regarding the role of English language in multilingual countries. English language is not a threat; rather, it is a tool for sustainable development. An understanding of the dispute between linguistic imperialism viewpoint and development perspective will help TESOL students take an informed stance with regard to the role of English in society and deter them from taking an extremist stance.

Due to global connectivity and digital education infrastructure, innovation (theory, model, or practice) even in a remote rural school matters to the whole world. The benefit of the innovation can instantly be shared with the entire global academic community. Hence, though the authors of the book chapters used local data (i.e. data collected from Bangladesh) in their research, the implication of the ideas, analysis, and theories articulated in the book is global. By way of example, in Nepal, the quality of English language teachers and instructional materials is not satisfactory (Aryal, Short, Fan, & Kember, 2016). The lessons for Nepal are available in Section II and Section VI. Sri Lanka, like Bangladesh, experienced difficulties in the management of language education policies (Liyanage, 2021). This country will be able to draw insights from the chapters on the impact of language education policy reforms in Bangladesh.

Saudi Arabia is struggling with EAP curriculum (Mudawy & Mousa, 2015) and classroom practices (Al-Khairi, 2013). The experience of Bangladesh (Section II, Chapter 7) will be useful for them. The findings in Section III are relevant for Indonesia since the school level English national exam in Indonesia has a negative impact on society and community (Effendi & Suyudi, 2017). In the context of Iran, Rassouli and Osam (2019) identified a positive attitude of people toward English language. Similar topics are explored in Section VI in the handbook. Therefore, Iran will be able to gain insights from the experience of Bangladesh.

### Historical Shift

The handbook indicates that a *New School of TESOL* is emerging in Bangladesh. In his ‘Foreword’ in the handbook, Pennycook points out that “a new generation of Bangladeshi scholars is taking over the project, a process that is as much about epistemological and political change as generational shift” (p. xxiv). This idea of Pennycook about different generations of ELT experts in Bangladesh coincides with the *generation theory* that I developed in Rahaman (2015). I would like to expand this theory in light of the observation of Pennycook and the chapters published in the handbook.

The research included in the handbook, the data that I used in Rahaman (2015), and the analysis of an interview of a senior ELT academic indicate that there are three generations of English language educators in Bangladesh. The *first generation* of ELT specialists was trained mainly in British academia in the 1980s and 1990s. They adopted the ‘craft model’ (Wallace, 1991) to improve the quality of English teaching in Bangladesh. As a result, this generation was not research-active. The small number of journal articles that they produced mostly contains summaries of ELT theories. The *second generation* (from the year 2000) made an attempt to critically reflect on the ELT methods and the theories of applied linguistics. The publications of this generation predominantly focused on the contextual unfitness of Western ELT

methods. The *third generation* (roughly from 2015) is highly research-active and innovative. From the year 2015, there was a rapid growth in the contribution of TESOL scholars to international journals from Bangladesh. The researchers from this generation are data-driven, can bracket their emotions (if necessary) while doing research, and can offer alternatives. To put it another way, they do not get stuck in the criticism loop and are unwilling to reinvent the wheel.

The *New School of TESOL* in Bangladesh, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, is evolving through the intellectual practices of the *third generation* language education researchers ('new generation' for Pennycook, 2021, p. xxiv, this handbook). The properties of this handbook suggest the following attributes of the *New School*. First, there is diversity in the epistemological orientation in research. Specifically, the *New School* embraces a wide array of epistemological traditions including positive (see Section II and III), anti-positive (see Chapter 21 and 25), and critical (see Chapter 23 and 26). Second, the *New School* is not ideologically biased. For example, the handbook neither endorses the fanatic view on 'linguistic imperialism' nor supports the extremist perspective that English competence alone can ensure development and equity. Third, the interdisciplinary outlook of the *New School* helps researchers avoid a myopic view in theory building (see Section V and section VI of the handbook). Fourth, the instructional practices of the *New School* are evidence-based and data-driven (see Section II and III). Finally, the *New School* does not encourage armchair research. As an illustration, the handbook carries chapters authored by organic intellectuals (for example, M. Obaidul Hamid in Chapter 21), barefoot anthropologists (Qumrul Hasan Chowdhury and Elizabeth J. Erling in Chapter 26), and technical analysts (Akhter Jahan in Chapter 6, Rubiana Khan in Chapter 8, and Mian Md. Naushaad Kabir in Chapter 13). Thus, the *third generation* and the *New School* advance data-driven research practice.

### **Caveat**

Though this handbook is a precious resource for the TESOL community and the stakeholders, some concepts should be treated with caution. For

example, the frequent co-occurrence of the phrases ‘neoliberal’ and ‘English’ in different sections of the handbook may confuse readers who are not familiar with the theories of political economy. The chapters that mention the term ‘neoliberal’ represent English language as an oppressive instrument. Since the handbook does not include any exhaustive discussion on neoliberal economy, the readers may try to make sense of neoliberalism from original sources such as Adam Smith or David Ricardo. The readers will be able to take an informed stance if they understand the principles of neoliberalism from non-ideological texts.

In Bangladesh, due to historical reasons, there is a tendency to criticize donor-led development projects. In some portions of the handbook (e.g. Chapters 11 and 23), TESOL discipline is portrayed as a conspiracy of foreign donor agencies. Such characterization will generate difficult emotions such as guilt among the pre-service TESOL educators enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. The readers should carefully examine the reports of the donor-led ELT projects to develop a balanced understanding of the outcomes of these projects. Apart from the ‘neoliberal’ and ‘donor’ related bafflement, a third confusion originates from the use of the terms CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) and ELT (English Language Teaching). These two terms have been used synonymously in Chapters 2, 4, and 11. Such naïve treatment of these loaded terms will mislead the stakeholders.

## Conclusion

*The Routledge handbook of English language education in Bangladesh* is an invaluable asset for the Global South. This book tells us about the intellectual history of English language education in Bangladesh and the epistemological strength of the TESOL discipline. Additionally, the book is a strong response to those educational management and academic administrators who believe that the role of TESOL educators is limited to teaching merely grammar and paragraph writing. As the handbook demonstrates the intellectual rigor of the TESOL discipline, this handbook will be a bargaining manual to negotiate budget and funding

for TESOL research in the universities. The university administration in the era of Education 4.0 should understand that TESOL academics are not asking for research funds to explore how to teach pronunciation or vocabulary. The horizon is broad and the depth is deep.

This handbook is exemplary in the production of useful knowledge. In other words, the authors of this volume exhibit that research is not a private enterprise; rather, it is an initiative for the public interest. The broad canvas of this handbook captures a comprehensive picture of TESOL in Bangladesh. Therefore, future book projects from Bangladesh may focus on specific topics such as TESOL material writing, English for Academic Purposes, or English language pedagogy in rural communities.

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