THE BANGLADESHI EMPLOYMENT SECTOR: EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES CONCERNING ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: This paper presents a brief summary of a study which was carried out to investigate how employers representing major employment sectors in the Bangladeshi Industry view the skills and English proficiency level of the current employees. Opinions were also solicited on what skills are required for fresh recruits. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 employers representing the major employment sectors in Bangladeshi Industry. Results revealed the importance of English as an indispensible means of communication in the Bangladeshi corporate sector and showed that the business enterprises use extensive amounts of English. It also highlighted that the existent English proficiency of the employees was far below the required proficiency level. Recommendations were made to address the gap and prepare the youth to meet the demands of the global market.

Keywords: English proficiency, competency, employability skills, global literacy skills,

Abstrak: Makalah ini menghadirkan ringkasan singkat sebuah kajian yang dilaksanakan untuk meneliti bagaimana para pemberi kerja yang mewakili sektor-sektor kerja utama dalam industri Bangladesh memandang keterampilan dan tingkatan kecakapan Bahasa Inggris para pekerja mereka saat ini. Pendapat mereka juga ditanyakan mengenai keterampilan apa yang dibutuhkan untuk pekerja baru. Wawancara semi terstruktur dilakukan terhadap 30 pemberi kerja yang mewakili sektor besar industri Bangladesh. Hasilnya mengungkapkan pentingnya Bahasa Inggris sebagai alat komunikasi yang tak terhindarkan dalam sektor bisnis Bangladesh dan menunjukkan bahwa perusahaan-perusahaan sering sekali menggunakan Bahasa Inggris. Temuan juga menyoroti kecakapan berbahasa Inggris pekerja yang masih jauh di bawah tingkat kecakapan yang dibutuhkan. Akhirnya, rekomendasi diberikan untuk mengatasi ketimpangan tersebut dan mempersiapkan pemuda agar bisa memenuhi tuntutan pasar global.

Katakunci: Keterampilan berbahasa Inggris, kompetensi, keterampilan dalam bekerja, keterampilan literasi global.
Nowadays English is the language of the latest business management in the world and is also the means of scientific discourse (Manivannan, 2006). English is used for international communication where the inter-locutors do not have a common first language (Kennedy, 2001). Because most new technologies were developed in the West, consequently most of the associated terminology is in English, and so it is necessary for Periphery nations to use English to obtain and use these technologies when developing or modernizing their services, industries and infrastructures (Kachru, 1994). Moreover English is best suited to social development because it facilitates modernization, leisure, career opportunities and choice (Moritoshi, 2001).

In the present day English is perceived as a highly influential factor in employment and promotion in Periphery nations as diverse as:

- China, where a test of English proficiency determines employment and promotion and facilities (Yong & Campbell, 1995).
- Brazil, where most organizations and companies and all multinational ones use or take into account the ‘Test of English for international communication’ (TOEIC) scores when reviewing job applications and promotions (Friedrich, 2000).
- Saudi Arabia, where most Saudi graduates believe English can enhance their nation’s economical development (Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996).
- Pakistan, where all communication is in English and promotions and employment are governed by English proficiency (Sirat, et al. 2008).
- Malaysia, where primary employment requirements are the ability to communicate in English and high academic achievement and good technical knowledge (Sirat, et al. 2008).

Bangladesh is a developing nation which has been and is at present struggling against poverty and illiteracy since its inception in 1971. As a primarily monolingual nation where Bangla is the official national language and the mother tongue of the majority of the populace, Bangladesh has had little scope for the use of its official second language English till recently. However since the 1990’s the global literacy skills i.e. proficiency in technology and English has affected globalization which has deeply influenced the political, socio-economic and cultural dimensions of most societies (Harvey, 1990) including Bangladesh. Eager to participate in the global economy like other developing nations Bangladesh has opened itself to the rest of the world and as in other former colonies of Western superpowers; participation in the global economy has meant “an explosion” of foreign investments which have opened up job opportunities where English competency is the prerequisite for employment (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). Courtesy of the internet and globalization, the arrival of multinationals and participation in international organizations, English is the medium in which business is conducted and is the de facto lingua franca of international communication, and it has become a much sought after commodity (Crystal, 2003; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).

The medium of education for the general masses is Bangla and only a small fraction of the Bangladeshi population can afford private English education (Khan, 2004) but this elite group is gaining an advantage over the rest who receive inadequate or no English language teaching in the state educational system. English is the language of the educated elite and is not commonly used in daily inter-action yet the contemporary labor market, particularly the Bangladeshi corporate world, needs a work force that is competent in English.

Within the country, employment in any organization looks for proficiency in English. Entry into government jobs requires being selected through a competitive examination where English is a
subject, while any non-government office that has dealings outside the national border looks particularly for people with English proficiency. Since the pay structure of such NGO’s is better than other jobs, people are interested to be employed there, and want to learn English. (Quder, 1999, p. 187)

Graddol in his investigations of global level of English found that “in many countries English has become implicated in social and economic mechanisms which structure in equality” (Graddol, 1997, p. 38)

This is found to be true in the case of Bangladesh at present, where English can open doors to wealth, prestige and success (Moham, 2007) but it is also “a gate keeping mechanism,” providing access to information and high-tech communication to the limited few who have access to English education (David & Govindasamy, 2005). English proficiency is used as a screening mechanism in most job selections, university admission tests and even the Bangladesh Civil Service entrance examinations (BCS).

English is now in much demand to facilitate the participation of young Bangladeshis in global activities (Choudhury, 2001). The mushrooming of English language coaching centers all over Dhaka city and the other major cities along with the proliferation of advertisements for English courses in most national dailies attest to the power of the language and its increased demand.

This research sought the opinion of major employers in the Bangladeshi corporate sector in order to establish the present standard of English proficiency amongst corporate employees and their shortcomings. Moreover information was also obtained regarding the English proficiency and deficiencies of job applicants. Studies in other South East Asian ex-colonies corroborate the accuracy of Graddol’s findings vis-à-vis the existing role, status and importance of English in the employment sector globally.

In her exploration of the employers’ perceptions of language needs in Pakistan, Mansoor (2007) found that English is a prerequisite for employment and promotions; moreover most written work and documentation were in English. In senior management posts English is mandatory and the current trend showed a rise of the use of English in the workplace. Finally, the language proficiency of most employees was perceived as below the required levels. Consequently, most institutions conducted in-house English courses.

So-mui & Mead’s (2000) appraisal of the workplace communication of textile and clothing merchandisers in Hong Kong revealed that written English was used more than spoken English; fax, e-mail, telephone and face-to-face communication were the most common and preferred modes of communication and communications in English took place with over 46 countries.

In her examination of the English language needs of hospital staff, Menon (2000) found that equal proficiency in all the four skills is not a requirement for service sector workers so that flaws in communication were possible. The main emphasis was on listening and speaking and grammar; basic reading for technical routine matters was needed, but writing was minimally used as online and written materials were available.

Thompson (2001) surveyed the important entry-level employability skills sought by employers in the Chippewa Valley area and discovered that Employers felt that “barely half of the new employees entering the work force possess the critical skills of listening and speaking” (Thompson, 2001, p. 9). Furthermore:

[T]wo out of every five job applicants who were tested for basic skills -- defined as functional workplace literacy -- the ability to read instructions, write reports -- at an adequate level -- were categorized as deficient”; and that ‘new employees entering the work force -- do not possess the ‘critical skills’ that today’s employers deem necessary. (Thompson, 2001, p. 2)

In researching the causes for graduate unemployment in Malaysia, Sirat, et al. (2008) identified “the ability to
communicate in English” and “high academic achievement and good technical knowledge” as primary employment requirements. They stressed that the industrial sector prioritized English skills and that most unemployed graduates had failed to take advantage of available job opportunities because of their weakness in English. Moreover employers determined job applicants’ weaknesses from written assignments and applications and thus both written and oral English skills were job requirements.

In their investigation of the language proficiency of Malaysian graduates Sarudin, et al. (2008) found that “graduates failed to impress” interviewers’ panels in job interviews as they lacked English conversation and communication skills. Most employees were perceived as “limited users of English” in the productive skills (writing and speaking) and “modest users of English” in the receptive skills (reading and listening). Employers stressed that it was “essential for employees to perform well in writing—in order to function effectively” in working environments in industry. Employees in the banking and legal sectors, faced problems entertaining clients, participating in meetings and discussions and presenting papers in English, as they could not present their views and opinions effectively in English. Shockingly, government staff could not be sent for overseas training because of their “limited ability to write and speak in English” and there were concerns about the “lack of reading.”

This study looked into the English Language requirements of the Bangladeshi employment sector today and tried to determine the employers’ perceptions as regards the present levels of English proficiency. It was hoped that the requirements and needs of the Bangladeshi employment sector as well as the shortcomings and lacks of job applicants would be identified in this process.

**METHOD**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty employers representing the major employment sectors in Bangladeshi Industry; the main criterion for selection was successful business enterprises that not only had a large number of employees but also frequently employed fresh graduates (see appendix for questionnaire).

**Sampling:** Employers from the following sectors were chosen:

- Private Hospital
- Private bank
- Public bank
- Private Telecom company
- Security services company
- Insurance company
- Buying house
- Private School
- Private University College
- Private Television channel
- English News Daily
- Bangla News Daily
- National Airlines
- Five Star Hotel
- Non Government Organization (NGO)
- Bangladesh Civil Services Commission (BCS)
- Advertising agency
- Travel agency
- Shipping industry
- Garments industry
- Housing industry
- Food industry
- Electronics industry
- Pharmaceutical industry
- Leather industry
- Ceramics industry
- Tobacco industry
- Automobile assembly industry
- Tea industry
- Agro industry
Most of the interview findings have been tabulated and converted to numerical data for clarity and certain selected interview excerpts pertinent to the study have been analyzed and presented in order to shed light on employers’ opinions with regard to the need and importance of English in the Bangladeshi business arena as well as the existing standard of English.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents and discusses some of the significant findings and themes arising from the research that was carried out pertaining to the views of Bangladeshi employers concerning the English proficiency and problems of current corporate employees and job applicants.

Role and Significance of English in the Bangladeshi Corporate Arena

In order to ascertain the significance of English in the Bangladeshi business scene the researchers investigated the extent to which the various business enterprises used English in their day-to-day communication. The following table presents the findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate of use of English at workplace</th>
<th>Number of Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High use of English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Total</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low use of English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub Total</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB N=30

From the findings it appears that the business enterprises use an extensive amount of English; ranging from companies which have a low frequency of English use (10%-40%) to companies which have very high frequencies of English use (50%-100%) (see Table:1). These results strongly sustain the importance of and the need for adequate English proficiency in order for Bangladeshi business enterprises to function properly.

Further investigation was carried out in order to gain a clearer idea of the nature of the communication. The results are depicted in the following figure:

**Figure 1: Amount of English Communication**

![Figure 1: Amount of English Communication](image-url)
The findings established that almost all communication (90%; 94%) both local and international is conducted in English even in a monolingual, predominantly Bangla speaking nation like Bangladesh (see Figure 1). These findings strongly support those of So-mui & Mead (2000) in Hong Kong and Mansoor (2007) in Pakistan and reinforce the importance of and need for good English proficiency.

The employers’ views about various aspects of the language skills were examined next; the findings are summarized in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills needed by applicants</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NR</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen from Table 2 the majority of the employers (94%) expected proficiency in the productive skills (speaking and writing); moreover the receptive skills (reading and listening) are expected by a considerable number of employers (70-74%) (see Table 3). In addition the Automobile, Banking, Real estate, Shipping, Electronics, Leather and Ceramics sector employers observed that “depending on the context” any of the skills may be required so proficiency in all skills is necessary. The findings correspond to those of Mansoor (2007) in Pakistan, Sarudin, et al. (2008) in Malaysia and So-mui & Mead (2000) in Hong Kong and establish that depending on the situation equally good proficiency in all the skills is a requirement in the Bangladeshi business scene.

Then, the employers’ opinions about the skills that are used most often in workplace communications in Bangladeshi business organizations were looked into. The findings show that the overwhelming majority of the employers (90%; 97%) expected the use of written and spoken communications in the workplace; and a considerable number of employers (77%; 60%) expected the use of reading and listening (see Table 2). From these findings it can be inferred that employers expect adequate proficiency and some use of all four skills in workplace communications. The Housing sector employer commented that nowadays even local Bangladeshi clients “expect spoken and written English communications”; similarly the buying house, advertising agency, ceramics industry, shipping industry, automobile industry, electronics industry, tea industry employers stated that “all communications nowadays are in English” and “it is a growing need in the market today”. These findings concur with those of So-mui & Mead (2000) in Hong Kong, Sarudin, Zubairi, Nordin & Omar (2008) in Malaysia and Mansoor (2007) in Pakistan.

Subsequently the crucial job skills from the employers’ perspective were probed. The findings attested to the fact that nowadays proficiency in all four skills is to some extent crucial in the Bangladeshi corporate setting since the outstanding majority of the employers (77%; 67%; 67%) perceived writing, listening and speaking as crucial skills and half of the employers (50%) also perceived reading as a crucial skill (refer to Table 2). The findings reflect those of Mansoor (2007) in Pakistan and Sirat, et al.
(2008) in Malaysia and strongly establish that equal good proficiency in all the language skills is a need of the Bangladeshi corporate setting. The employers’ opinion about the English aptitude of their existing employees was sought next.

Perceptions concerning the English proficiency

Surprisingly it was discovered that the majority of the employers (60%) did not perceive their employees as proficient in the productive skills i.e. speaking and writing; however a large number of employers (54%; 47%) perceived them as proficient in reading and listening (see Table 2). The BCS employer even commented that “they can write, but only wrong English, with no sentence structure, grammar or anything.” Along the same lines the NGO, buying house, advertising agency, tea industry, television and building industry employers observed that “everything they write has to be completely rewritten, not corrected”; and the advertising and television employers commented that “they have a lot of potential but cannot do anything because they are unable to communicate.” These findings regarding the prevalent unsatisfactory levels of English proficiency in the corporate sector of Bangladesh are similar to those of Sirat, et al. (2008) in Malaysia, Mansoor (2007) in Pakistan and Thompson (2001) in the United States of America.

The skills most in need of improvement from the Employers’ viewpoint were ascertained after that. It was found that the majority of the employers (90%; 74%) identified the productive skills – speaking and writing as most in need of improvement; many employers (54%) also felt that listening needed improvement (see Table 2). Many employers felt improvement was particularly necessary in writing as most employers had to “regularly edit and double-check” all written communications. The Electronics industry employer, declared that “they cannot write anything, not even a hundred words write-up” since they “do not have the language, grammar or anything”.

The travel agency, leather industry and ceramics industry employers remarked that “English is not being given enough emphasis in education”; additionally the media, leather industry, tea industry, ceramics industry, housing industry, buying house sector employers opined that “the education system is faulty” as students “can pass exams without studying, just by memorizing a few answers”; besides they commented that “the teachers themselves are poor and not proficient in English and are unable to teach their students as they themselves are products of this same faulty system; a complete change in methodology is needed.” These findings paint a quite sorry picture of the current standards of English in the Bangladeshi corporate scene and reflect the findings of Thompson (2001) in the United States of America and Sarudin, et al. Omar (2008) in Malaysia.

In order to gain a more comprehensive idea about the nature of the deficiency in the employee’s English proficiency further investigations were conducted, the findings are presented in Table 3.

The employers were asked to rate their perception of their employees’ English proficiency and the English proficiency that they required in order for their enterprise to function optimally, on an ascending scale of 1 to 10. In this manner an approximation of the gap between the actual and the required levels of the employees’ English proficiency was made. It was discovered that irrespective of how high or low the required levels of English proficiency were, the actual proficiency levels were invariably much lower; it should be noted that most of these organizations had extremely stringent recruitment procedures and different sectors emphasized on the requirement of different communicative skills (see Table 3). It may be mentioned that the insurance agency, travel agency and daily English did not need reading skills, while Garment industry did not need listening and speaking skills. Hence from these findings it was established that a considerable gap existed between the
required and actual levels of English proficiency in all the skills and in all the chosen corporate sectors. These findings may also be taken as an indication of the employers’ dissatisfaction with prevailing levels of English proficiency.

Table 3: Gap between required and actual levels of employees’ English proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Sector</th>
<th>Listening Level</th>
<th>Speaking Level</th>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Writing Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telecom</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public bank</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private bank</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying house</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public school</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV channel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangla daily</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English daily</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airlines</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel agency</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garments</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agro</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food industry</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shipping</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Req. – Required; Act. – Actual; NR – Not Required

Furthermore it was found that many business enterprises tried to address the problem of the inadequate English proficiency of their employees by conducting in-house English courses. This was the next point of investigation where the results are depicted in Figure 2.
It was found that an overwhelming majority of the organizations (80%) had compulsory in-house language development courses and some of the organizations (34%) availed of British Council’s executive courses (see Figure 3). These findings clearly emphasize the indispensability as well as importance and necessity of English proficiency in the Bangladeshi corporate sector and at the same time call attention to the employees’ serious lack of satisfactory English proficiency.

Perceptions pertaining to the English proficiency

It was determined that half of the employers (50%) perceived entry-level job applicants as incompetent in listening; an overwhelming majority of the employers (80%) perceived them as incompetent in speaking; and similarly a considerable number of employers (67%) perceived them as incompetent in writing (see Table 2). Thus except for reading, the employers did not perceive job applicants as competent in any of the other skills. Additionally employers from the agro industry, tea industry, ceramics industry, electronics industry, buying house, advertising agency and BCS sectors commented that the English proficiency of most job applicants is “very poor” and “not up to the mark”. The Media sector employers remarked that though “there has been an apparent increase in literacy—these graduates are good for nothing”, unfortunately “they are a liability not an asset as they are totally incompetent.” These findings and sentiments expressed reflect those of Sirat, et al. (2008) in Malaysia and Thompson (2001) in the United States of America. Thus it was acknowledged that the English proficiency of the majority of job applicants is far below the standards required for employment in the Bangladeshi corporate scene and a general dissatisfaction with the prevailing English proficiency of job applicants on the part of the corporate employers was also discerned.

The employers’ views about the impact of a lack of English proficiency on a job applicant’s career prospects were examined and the results are depicted in Figure 3.

It was discovered that in accordance with Graddol’s findings as well as that of other related studies the majority of the employers (93%) stated that a lack of English language skills seriously hampered the job prospects of prospective applicants. The Bangladesh Civil Services Commission (BCS) and garments industry employers were the only respondents who would employ a professionally competent graduate lacking English proficiency (refer to Figure 3). Also employers from the electronics industry, tea industry, automobile industry, banking, leather industry, shipping industry, tobacco industry, private university-college, private telecom, NGO and ceramics industry disclosed that they “head hunted” for people “good in English” as nowadays even in Bangladesh “the corporate world is competitive and globalized” and the “company image” is important, so
employers want “smart and English speaking” employees. This highlights the importance of English proficiency for employment in the Bangladeshi corporate scenario and implies that English is widely being used as “a gate keeping mechanism” in job recruitment in Bangladesh.

Figure 3: Employers’ opinions on whether the lack of English affects career prospects

It was discovered that in accordance with Graddol’s findings as well as that of other related studies the majority of the employers (93%) stated that a lack of English language skills seriously hampered the job prospects of prospective applicants. The Bangladesh Civil Services Commission (BCS) and garments industry employers were the only respondents who would employ a professionally competent graduate lacking English proficiency (refer to Figure 3). Also employers from the electronics industry, tea industry, automobile industry, banking, leather industry, shipping industry, tobacco industry, private university-college, private telecom, NGO and ceramics industry disclosed that they “head hunted” for people “good in English” as nowadays even in Bangladesh “the corporate world is competitive and globalized” and the “company image” is important, so employers want “smart and English speaking” employees. This highlights the importance of English proficiency for employment in the Bangladeshi corporate scenario and implies that English is widely being used as “a gate keeping mechanism” in job recruitment in Bangladesh.

Finally, information was gathered on the widespread job selection processes in Bangladesh, Figure 4 illustrates the findings.

Figure 4: Form of assessment prevalent in job selections
It was found that in keeping with the findings of Sirat, et al. (2008) in Malaysia, Mansoor (2007) in Pakistan and Thompson (2001) in the United States of America the majority of the employers (97%; 94%) formally assessed job applicants’ speaking skills and writing skills at the very initial phase of recruitment (see Figure 4). Moreover employers from the private bank, tobacco industry, leather industry, shipping industry, and BCS firmly stated that unless job applicants successfully qualified in the initial written assessment they would not be called for an oral interview nor be given the chance to prove their professional competence. These findings reinforced that English proficiency is the key deciding factor for employment in Bangladesh; and the productive skills—writing and speaking in particular—are essential. It was thus ascertained that without English proficiency employment in the Bangladeshi corporate scenario would be impossible.

CONCLUSION

This investigation attempted to determine how employers who are major players in Bangladeshi industry viewed the function and importance of English in the workplace, their outlook concerning the English aptitude of their present employees and their viewpoint regarding the requirements and English competency of new recruits. On the basis of the findings, shortcomings and deficiencies in the English proficiency of the Bangladeshi corporate workforce were identified. The significant findings that ensued from this research may be summarized as follows: 1) The widespread use and prevalence of English in the Bangladeshi corporate scene was established; 2) It was recognized that English is an undisputed and indispensable means of communication in today’s Bangladeshi corporate sector; 3) It was determined that the prevailing English proficiency of corporate employees fall far below the level of proficiency required in order for business enterprises to function optimally; 4) It was acknowledged that employers are on the whole dissatisfied with their employees’ English proficiency; 5) It was found that most corporate organizations are attempting to address this shortcoming by implementing compulsory English courses for their staff; 6) It was established that English proficiency is the key factor in determining the employability of job applicants in most job selections; 7) It was documented that the English proficiency of most job applicants are below the required standards and are therefore perceived as unsatisfactory by employers; 8) reinforced the importance of and prevalence of English in the employment sector; and 9) It was thus established that in spite of compulsory English at the pre-university level and additional English at the university freshmen the present system of education has failed to equip today’s Bangladeshi youth with the English competency necessary for employment.

In view of the inadequacies and shortcomings determined from the investigation the following recommendations have been made. Firstly, data should be collected and constructive feedback and input should be obtained concerning the requirements and shortcomings in English proficiency from the main people concerned, namely the employers, employees, job applicants, students and educators. Secondly, the English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula being used presently at the school and university levels need to be revised on the basis of comprehensive feedback from the major stakeholders in order to address the present inadequacies in English proficiency. Thirdly, samples of authentic written communication and spoken communication should be obtained from the business sector and analyzed in order to inform, model and update the ELT curricula being used at school and university levels. Fourthly, authentic workplace communication should be analyzed and observed in order to inform and assist in updating the existing school and university level ELT curricula. Fifthly, authentic samples of writing should be obtained from students and job
applicants and analyzed in order to identify the specific sub-skill areas in need of improvement and changes should be made accordingly to the existing school and university level ELT curricula. Next, listening and reading tasks and practice based on actual corporate sector requirements and tasks should be ascertained and included as part of the remodeled school and university level ELT curricula. Then, ELT methodology and classroom practice at the school and university level need to be modified in order to address the existing shortcomings in the English proficiency of the workforce. Finally, Comprehensive, informed policies and measures based on research and analysis of the actual needs of the business sector should be implemented in order to rectify the situation and equip the workforce with employable English skills.

At present Bangladesh fears marginalization and is faced with the grim reality of lagging behind neighboring nations (Sungwon, 2007) that are forging ahead in terms of access to the world market, mainly on account of the English proficiency of their workforce. At the moment in Bangladesh, English is simultaneously perceived as “enriching and inevitable, even necessary” and “imperialistic and damaging” (Canagarajah, 1993) as it is in other parts of the world. The present attitude towards English in Bangladesh is one of “pragmatic liberalism” (Rahman, 2007); English is accepted as a modern-day asset, which is of key importance to national development. English which is not within easy reach of the multitude has become and is being seen as the most potent instrument of social and economic advancement (Rahman, 2007). Thus English is now acknowledged as a means to maximize opportunities (Bisong, 1995) and has become a principal asset in attaining global participation and leadership. As long as English continues to be the language of international discourse (Hashimoto, 2007) there is no other alternative than to familiarizing and equipping ourselves with satisfactory English proficiency.

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APPENDIX

Semi-structured Interview Questions for Bangladeshi Employers

A Needs Assessment of the Employers’ Perspective of the importance of English Language (EL)

1. What EL skills must a fresh graduate have when seeking employment?
   Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
2. Are you satisfied with the EL skills of graduates during interviews?
   Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
3. How many of your employees actually need to communicate in English? (in %)
4. Do you have to communicate internationally and/or locally if so how?
5. What sort of communication skills do your employees use in workplace communications?
   Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
6. Does a lack of EL skills hinder people from getting jobs?
7. What EL skills do you consider to be important for your organization?
   Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
8. What EL skills are crucial for your line of work?
9. Are your employees sufficiently proficient?
   Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
10. Which areas do you feel need improvement?
    Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
11. Do your employees have to undergo any English language training? If so is it in-house or otherwise?
12. Please rate the importance of the following skills on a scale of 1-10 (1-least important and 10-most important)
    Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
13. What level of proficiency in the skills do you need from your employees for the optimum functioning of your organization on a scale of 1-10? (1-least important and 10-most important)
    Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
14. What is your perception of the present level of proficiency of your employees on a scale of 1-10? (1-least important and 10-most important)
    Listening  Speaking  Reading  Writing
15. Final comments?