



They Need To Learn English

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BANGLADESH Agricultural University, Mymensingh, the only one of its kind, came into being in 1961. It started functioning in the following year. By now it has developed six full-fledged faculties, viz. Agriculture, Engineering, Animal Husbandry, Veterinary Science, Economics and Rural Sociology and Fisheries.

Departments like Mathematics, Physics, Botany, Chemistry, Zoology, Bengali and English—better known as Basic Science and Languages departments—had their start from the very beginning of the University.

Upto the year 1969 the minimum requirement for admission into the 1st year classes was a matriculate having passed in the second division. All the Basic Science and Language courses were compulsory for the 1st and 2nd year students. The English department used to offer a language course, as was the case with Bengali, to meet the language deficiencies of the students. Upto this time all academic programmes were carried out in accordance with the principles laid down in the University's original Master Plan. But from 1970 the University changed its academic and admission policy, though the University authority did it declare the original Master Plan annulled. And with the admission of H.S.C. students English took leave of the University syllabus.

New Policy

Any change for the better is welcome. But it was unfortunate that the

University authority switched over to a new policy without making necessary provisions for the better utilization of some of the departments including the English department. As a result, some experienced and trained teachers were left with no teaching load for years together. This gives rise to certain basic questions:

Is it not a sheer wastage of talent and energy? Can we afford to such a costly misuse of human resources? The main job of a teacher is teaching and the lack of it will gradually push a teacher into intellectual backwater.

There is no denying the fact that, generally speaking, the students' knowledge of English is lamentably poor and that they still need an English course to meet their language deficiencies.

Efforts were made to introduce a language course but the authority never recognized the need for it. There was a good deal of controversy over it in the Academic Council. Some argued that the students were already overburdened and some even went to the extent of saying that this University could no longer risk losing its technical character by strengthening language departments. Thus, all discussions held at the Faculty level were inconclusive.

It was towards the close of the last decade when an embarrassing truth began to dawn upon the University authority that the language deficiency among the University graduates had reached an alarming stage. Many students had little access to their English texts and other books of reference and they looked blank

when lectures were delivered in English. The English we use for Science is in many ways different from common expressions. This fact called for a special English course that could help students understand the language used for scientific and technical writings.

British Council

The English department, following consultations with the University authority, renewed its efforts to remove the students' language deficiency. The department exchanged views with the British Council, Dhaka, and eventually it came forward for the redress. It brought language experts from England who met the then Vice-Chancellor and the Deans of faculties for a decision. The University authority agreed in principle to introduce a special language course for its students.

The British experts in their bid to ascertain the real language needs tried out a 'programmed text' on students at tertiary level. The findings revealed that the students needed a language course what in England is called ESP (English for Specific Purposes). ESP is a methodical, scientific, relevant and pragmatic language course. It deals, along with three necessary skills of English, viz. reading, writing and understanding and thus it helps a learner to acquire skills in a specific area within a short time. Accordingly, the University got two of its language teachers trained in ESP by the British experts in 1978. During the period of training the situation in

the University again took an unfavourable turn. By the time the trained teachers joined the department, the possibility of introducing an ESP course seemed highly tantalizing. Time went on. The authority maintained a discreet silence over any language issue. Being utterly discouraged, both the trained teachers left the country accepting teaching positions abroad in 1980.

A long period of stagnation followed even after 1982 when one of the two teachers came back to join the department.

New Hope

During the tenure of the ex-Vice-Chancellor the Basic Science and Language departments had to pass through a trying phase on the question of their viability, because the Enam Committee report pleaded for the total abolition of this area. Such a move, however, faced resistance in the Academic Council. There are, however, expectations that the present administration will be in a position to break the stalemate. An optional language course has already been offered by the English department for the foreign students. Another proposal for a language course for general students is under active consideration of the concerned authority. Let us hope the English department will, though at long last, be able to revive its full teaching activities. Better late than never.

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