

Perceptions and Attitudes to Learning English



RESEARCH AND EVALUATION OF THE EIA SCHOOL INTERVENTION

An extensive research and evaluation programme is associated with the EIA project, particularly during the pilot phase but continuing through to 2017. For the school intervention, this involves both quantitative and qualitative studies directed at:

1. understanding teacher and student views about their experiences of, and how they think about, learning English;
2. examining classroom practice;
3. measuring teacher and student English language competence.

This briefing focuses on the first of these areas: perceptions and attitudes to learning English.

EXPLORING VIEWS ON LEARNING ENGLISH

Purpose and methodology

To ascertain views of English language practices within schools involved in the EIA pilot school intervention, the attitudes and perceptions of participating teachers and students were explored through a medium-scale mixed-method study. Teacher views were collected via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Primary and secondary student views were collected via student group interviews (SGIs); questionnaires were also used with secondary students.

The fieldwork was carried out in primary and secondary schools during July-August 2010, four to six months after the launch of the pilot. All fieldwork was carried out by researchers from the Institute of Education and Research (IER), University of Dhaka.

Sample

Questionnaires were completed by 103 primary teachers and 49 secondary teachers; the same teachers also participated in interviews (100 and 49 interviews respectively).

Data were also collected from the teachers' students. SGIs were conducted with a sub-section of one class: 612 primary students (all from Class 3) and 288 secondary students (Classes 7-10) participated. Further to this, questionnaires were administered to an entire secondary class (Grades 7-10) – 1693 were completed. Fieldwork was carried out in six divisions across Bangladesh.

KEY FINDINGS

Teachers

The study (reported in EIA 2011a) found that four to six months into the intervention, teachers' views were positive in terms of what they thought about EIA activities and about learning English (which underpins EIA activities).

1. Views on practice

Over 80% of primary and secondary teachers agreed that they mostly used English in the classroom, and over 90% agreed that they designed activities to enable interaction. (Similar proportions also agreed that students liked these kinds of activities.) At a basic level, teachers' perceptions matched observations of their classroom behaviour (see findings of studies on classroom practice; EIA 2011b, c, d & e, 2012a). Obvious as these findings may seem, universally teachers estimate that they speak for a much smaller proportion of lesson time than they actually do.

2. Views on learning English

The basic pedagogic conditions for a communicative approach are being seen in classrooms (EIA 2011c, d & e). There is also evidence of communicative language teaching (CLT) practices being widely used, and many, though not all, teachers' views on learning matched the communicative approaches adopted in EIA. For example:

- a. Most teachers (86% primary; 92% secondary) agreed that the focus in their English classes was communication, explaining grammar when necessary.
- b. Whilst only 26% of primary teachers thought that grammar rules should be explained explicitly in class, 53% of secondary teachers still thought grammar should be explained separately, perhaps reflecting examination requirements at this level.
- c. Only 33% of primary teachers and 39% of secondary teachers thought that students' English improved most quickly if they studied and practiced grammar.

Whilst CLT methods promoted by EIA suggest teachers pay less attention to error-correction (over-correction can inhibit students' experimenting with language), 98% of primary teachers and 82% of secondary teachers still expressed the view that error correction was important.

Students

This study (EIA 2011a) also found that four to six months into the intervention there had been success in creating positive student views towards EIA activities; however, their views on learning English were less aligned with the EIA approach.

1. Views on the activities experienced

Student views on the use of English matched both what teachers perceived and what observers saw in the classroom practice studies (EIA 2011b, c, d & e, 2012a): essentially that teachers used English most of the time. (This convergence of data sources demonstrates confidence in the data.) They also liked the activities that promoted their own opportunities to talk (e.g. group and pair work) and listening to audio and, in the case of primary students, singing the songs that were part of this audio. Indeed, students expressed positive views to all the EIA methods and materials being used by teachers.

2. Views on learning English

Although the basis of a communicative approach can be seen in primary and secondary student views of what they are experiencing, there is evidence (from questionnaire data) that learning grammar and having errors corrected remains highly valued by secondary students. While over 80% agreed that speaking English is essential in order to learn English, their views on learning grammar and having their errors corrected were more traditional than those of teachers. Almost all secondary students liked learning grammar rules and also liked errors to be corrected. While the former might again reflect the examination requirements, their views on error correction reflect basic ideas about how to learn English and this is what EIA needs to tackle.

SUMMARY

The results reported here show that after just four to six months of EIA, there had been some success in creating positive teacher views on EIA activities and about learning English. Student views were less clear-cut: positive attitudes were found towards EIA activities, but secondary students in particular still wanted to learn grammar and have errors corrected. We think this is probably due to the nature of examinations through which they are assessed.

It is also evident from students' views (and from the teachers' classroom practices (EIA 2011b, c, d & e, 2012a)) that teachers have been able to introduce the basic pedagogic changes towards a communicative approach in the classroom, and that students like these practices. Furthermore, teachers' views on learning English were largely supportive of their practices, although there were some notable areas, such as the teaching of grammar and error correction, where they are yet to be convinced. For

teachers there is thus, a convergence of minds and behaviour in terms of their practice: indeed, that side of the EIA professional development programme is almost complete for the pilot teachers. However, the student side of EIA is only partially complete: their views on learning require some work to bring them more in line with a communicative approach, although the effect of examinations needs be countered for this to be successful.

These findings have two implications for EIA: i) it should work to change elements of the assessment system; and ii) it should support teachers in dealing with both students' learning and also students' views on learning. The latter is something that is a task in many parts of the world, as the international efforts on 'learning to learn' make clear (e.g. see James et al. 2007).

REFERENCES

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ENGLISH IN ACTION

Aims

EIA aims to enhance the economic and social prospects of people in Bangladesh by improving their communicative English. It does this through communicative language learning in primary and secondary classrooms, and television and other media, such as websites and mobile telephones, aimed at adults. By 2017 EIA will have reached 25 million people in Bangladesh.

Partners

EIA is a nine-year development project funded by UKaid from the Department for International Development (DFID). The project is implemented through a partnership of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and a consortium of three international partners: BMB Mott MacDonald, BBC Media Action and the Open University; and two national NGOs: Underprivileged Children's Education Programme (UCEP), and Friends in Village Development Bangladesh (FIVDB).

Scope of the pilot school intervention

The project's pilot phase was carried out during 2008-2011. In 2010-2011 EIA piloted its school programme with 690 teachers (465 primary; 225 secondary), supported by

59 Teacher Facilitators, and approximately 132,700 students (79,900 primary; 52,800 secondary) across all 7 divisions of Bangladesh.

The project's next two phases will scale up the school programme to larger numbers: by 2014 to reach 12,500 teachers and 900,000 students, and by 2017 to reach 80,000 teachers and over 10 million students.

Innovative teacher professional development in schools

EIA encourages teachers to introduce new English language learning activities into their classroom practice, with their students. Teachers are supported in making these changes by a range of project materials, including audio-visual materials provided at low cost through mobile technologies. The audio materials are designed to be used with students in class, whilst video resources help teachers understand and implement new practices. Pairs of teachers support each other in school and participate in professional development activities, such as workshops and cluster meetings, beyond school.

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