

An Assessment of Spoken English Competence among School Students, Teachers and Adults in Bangladesh



One of the Series of Baseline Studies undertaken for English in Action in 2008-09

Why this study was undertaken?

- English in Action (EiA) aims to develop language learning and teaching over a 9-year period. It is funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DfID).
- The goal of EiA is to "contribute to the economic growth of Bangladesh by providing English language as a tool for better access to the world economy". The purpose of the project is to "increase significantly the number of people able to communicate in English, to levels that enable them to participate fully in economic and social activities and opportunities".
- As there are no formal tests of oral or aural English in Bangladeshi schools, this study was undertaken to find out how well school teachers, students and community adults could communicate in English before the launch of EiA.
- At key stages in the life of the project it will enable us to determine how well the EiA project is achieving its purpose.

How and where were assessments made?

4012 students, 462 teachers and 268 community adults were interviewed during two phases of fieldwork. Highly experienced assessors from Trinity College, London conducted brief individual interviews. They took place in Government and non-government schools, at both Primary and Secondary levels. The schools visited were located in urban, semi-urban and rural locations - in Dhaka, central Bangladesh and around Sylhet.

Trinity's internationally recognized and well-tested language assessment scale covers 12 levels of spoken English ability within 4 stages. Grades 1-3 indicate an 'initial' stage, grades 4-6 indicate an 'elementary' stage, grades 7-9 indicate 'intermediate' stage and grades 10-12 indicate 'advanced' stage. Grade 0 indicates 'no spoken English'.



Key Findings

“The results show no increase in language ability that can be specifically tied to working through the [school] grades”

- More than 80% of the students were only to speak with a ‘basic’ level of English competency.
- There was little evidence of progression through the grades - more years of schooling did not result in higher levels of English competence among students.

“It is evident that teachers are teaching students at higher levels than their own [spoken] ability in the language”

- Most teachers in NGO schools (85%) were within the range of Trinity grades from 1 to 6. More than two-thirds of all NGO teachers (69%) were at Trinity grade 4 or below. 1.5% had no spoken English.
- The majority of teachers in government schools (81%) were within the range of Trinity grades from 1 to 6. However, more than two-thirds of teachers in government schools (70%) had spoken English at Trinity grade 4 or below. 8% had no spoken English.
- A substantial number of teachers of English were within the lowest of the Trinity stages (grade 3 or below) – 48% in government schools and 33% in NGO schools.

Community adults

- Spoken English was at a low level among community adults – 77% of females and 55% of males were at Trinity grade 1 or below. Almost no females and only 15% of males were above grade 4.

Key Conclusions

The spoken English competency of most Bangladeshi students, teachers and community adults was at a basic level. Even after many years of schooling a lot of students had not progressed beyond the initial stage of speaking in English.

As the teachers’ spoken English was often poor, they were unable to effectively teach the higher levels of the communicative English curriculum. This has an effect upon the level of competence attained by their students.