

IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH: NECESSITIES, APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES



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ABSTRACT

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Both English language teaching and learning are overwhelmingly in practice in Bangladesh, for English is a compulsory subject up to grade twelve in the education system of the country. Moreover, majority of the public and private jobs select prospective candidates on the basis of their proficiencies in English here. As a result, students belonging to multifarious academic, social, religious and economic backgrounds opt for learning English, which is why the magnitude of the number of English teaching institutions and teachers is also quite staggering across the country. Consequently, teaching English in the context of Bangladesh encounters numerous issues some of which are cooperating but many of which are hindering to the process. That is why, teaching and learning English in Bangladesh demand some considerations into the incorporation of the lessons on social justice not only for the academic excellence of the learners but also for ingraining among them the senses of equality, fraternity, tolerance, kindness, empathy, confidence and all the good attributes that are imperative for bringing positive changes into the classrooms as well as the community. Accordingly, this study aims at exploring the views of the English language instructors at the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh relating to the necessity of, pragmatic approaches to and possible challenges in implementing social justice in English language education. This research also focuses on identifying what sorts of changes take place among the English as a foreign language (EFL) learners while they go through lessons on English language skills embellished with the teachings of social justice. Furthermore, the study ventures for discovering how the English language teachers and students at the university level in Bangladesh react to and expect about social justice education in EFL classrooms. Pedagogically, this research attempts to come up with effective approaches to incorporate the knowledge of social justice into English language education and succeed in effectuating significant transformations among the EFL learners in Bangladesh.

Contribution/ Originality: This study stands to be one of the very few social-justice researches in Bangladesh, and it is the first one in relation to the implementation of social justice education in the EFL classrooms in the country. It aims to contribute substantially in establishing a prospective link between the burgeoning EFL arrangements and the inevitable social justice issues in the educational institutes across the nation.

1. INTRODUCTION

English language education is widely in practice in Bangladesh having it as a compulsory subject up to grade twelve of its education system. In addition, for job, career, academic improvement, business and commerce, international communication and higher study abroad, learning English language skills is a common mission for almost all the educated people. As a result, there exists a usual pace of teaching and learning English across the country participated by innumerable learners from multitudinous socio-economic, cultural, tribal, religious and regional linguistic backgrounds. Consequently, necessity requires that all the learners be brought under a unique message and understanding so that they end up cooperating one another and exploring and as well as enacting the best human attributes they have inside. This is where the term social justice emerges to be significant in the field of English language teaching and Learning in the context of Bangladesh. Novak (2009) defines social justice as a uniform phenomenon that brings people on the same platform and connects them with identical association and cooperation for attaining and distributing advantages and disadvantages equally. In a broader sense, Blake (2015) clarifies the idea of social justice among students by elucidating that it does not signify any singular phenomenon, rather it means to let the learners be aware of the existing inequalities, disparities and anomalies in and around them, and helps them go ahead to embrace a more just society embellished with individual freedom, right to resources, reception of respectful behavior regarding race, caste, sex, religion, economy or any disadvantage. To establish a link between social justice and language education, Piedrahita (2016) contemplates on social justice and language teacher, and argues that enacting social justice in language teaching can help the teachers have a distinct idea about what their roles and contributions to the social and political perspectives are and how they can realize affirmative changes in and out of the classrooms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Dell'Angelo (2014) defines social justice to be acknowledging and helping strengthen everyone's innate strength and prowess to bring commendable changes. Dell'Angelo (2014) also admits that teachers usually play the role to enact social justice in their classrooms and suggests that they vividly enforce classroom drills and practices to take it to a dynamic level. Regarding the inevitable affinity between English language education and social justice, Rodas and Osborn (2016) emphasize that in an English language education venture, there can be learners coming from versatile economic and cultural stands which may put them into unjustified circumstances and feelings to succeed in the language attainment, which is why they suggest that the language facilitators have to come up with strategies and approaches to remove any sort of unwelcoming issue and provide full fledged blossoming chances to the learners. In an attempt to justify the significance of language in establishing and promoting social justice, Westerlund (2015) provides that linguistic ability is inherently associated with understanding and speaking out for the issues relating to human development. Ferlazzo (2008) feels that the most imperative motto of an educational institute is to motivate and inspire learners to join and play significant roles in an altruistic society as well as plan and consider how they can actuate positive changes in the society. Kelly (2012) advocates that to ensure social justice in educational institutes and outside the classrooms, teachers have to take care of the students coming from multiple contexts having different prospects as well as problems, and accordingly they have to impart education and lessons on social and moral phenomena for the purpose of materializing affirmative mindsets among the learners. Correspondingly, this study endeavors to examine the urgency of, procedures for and obstacles to realizing social justice in the EFL classrooms at the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh.

2.1. Research Questions

The study focused the following questions:

- i. Is social justice necessary in teaching and learning English in Bangladesh?
- ii. Do the English language teachers in Bangladesh implement social justice while teaching English?

- iii. What are the possible and effective approaches of incorporating social justice into English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh?
- iv. How do the EFL teachers and learners in Bangladesh feel about social justice?
- v. What are the challenges EFL teachers in Bangladesh may face while actuating social justice in the classrooms?

2.2. Research Significance

Torres (2015) investigates why teaching about social justice matters and finds that as teachers we may ensure what our pupils are to face in the classrooms, but we cannot make sure what they are going to come across and have to deal with in the world outside the classrooms, which is why it is our unavoidable responsibility to safeguard them with the lessons and knowledge of social justice to face the multifaceted countenances of the real world that lies ahead. Blake (2015) on the importance dealing with the lessons of social justice in the institutions argues that classrooms are the proven platforms of social transformations facilitating rooms for championing and accomplishing novel innovations and ideas leading to the development of learners' critical thinking about their own rights, roles and power to change for the better. Rodas and Osborn (2016) discuss the importance of language ability being in concurrence with social justice and present that English language education does not mean only the proficiency in Language usage, rather it means more about learners' cognitive assimilation that gives them ideas about instructional inequalities and pushes them to desired breakthroughs.

Hence, it appears necessary enough to arrange the teaching of the issues of social justice to the students as much as possible. In case of the EFL learners, the imperativeness of social justice goes one step ahead as the classrooms of English language education generally are filled with the learners coming from versatile socio-cultural backgrounds, economic contexts and various levels of capabilities. Hence, the study on the necessity, approaches and challenges regarding the implementation of social justice in English language teaching and learning in the context of Bangladesh is a rightly chosen one for it is going to provide us with the scenario of the demand and effectuation of social justice education from the English language teachers' as well as learners' perspectives. The findings of the study will hopefully extend helping hands to the activation of social justice in and out of the EFL classrooms in Bangladesh, leading to a facilitated ambience for the materialization of English language education for the purpose of promoting humanitarian and civilized behavior and mindsets among the learners with a view to bringing affirmative transformations in the country. Furthermore, in the arenas of language education, social theory and research, the study is likely going to contribute potentially both in the country's education system and those of the outside world.

2.3. Pragmatic Approaches

Tickle (2015) emphasizes that social justice is now a buzzing phenomenon which many are ensuring through free schools and cultural education. Alsup and Miller (2014) present that teachers of English education have to deal with pupils from multifaceted social and cultural backgrounds, which in reality requires them to ensure each and every component of social justice. Concentration on social justice in activating English education promotes students' learning possibilities and scopes, opportunities to engage themselves in positive transformations and better dispositions in performance and achievements (Alsup and Miller, 2014). Pearson (2017) in the review of the book, *Social Justice in English Language Teaching*, advocates that in relation to enacting social justice, English education covers a wide range of phenomena, like peace building, language rights, gender and sexual orientation etc. Alber (2012) reports that as a teacher, she along with her colleagues embellishes the learners with the lessons and motivations on intellects, ethics, emotion and society leading them to be humane, cooperative, dutiful, compassionate and selfless citizens. Alber (2012) also emphasizes that in the lessons on social justice teachers nurture and train the students to be friends, partners, change makers, supporters and champions of equity and

goodness. It is also in the teachings of social justice that the teachers prepare the learners to stand up and raise voice against all sorts of injustices and anomalies in the society. Ferlazzo (2008) suggests that there are many remarkable instances and resources which the teachers can utilize with a view to implanting the teachings of social justice in the minds of the learners without arranging anything compelling or arbitrary. Teachers can draw the attentions of the students to historical examples relating to the goodness social justice can cause to happen and to the prevailing injustices and unbecoming issues where they all possible logics and means to interfere and bring a change for better (Ferlazzo, 2008).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The study followed a mixed method consisting of both qualitative and quantitative approaches that involved a case study and surveys. The case study was conducted on fifty EFL learners belonging to different faculties of Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Bangladesh. As an English language facilitator, I taught class sessions on English language skills accompanied with lessons on social justice to the target students. I conducted thirty class sessions in a four month period. In the classes in concurrence with teaching the four skills of English language, I discussed and inspired the teachings on social justice among the learners. In the process, I observed their progress and maintained records of their transformations. At the end of the course, I operated a survey on the participants on the basis of some related questions targeting to understand what they thought and felt about the effectuation of social justice in the English language class sessions.

The second phase of the study was solely a survey research conducted on twenty English language teachers who teach at the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh. These EFL instructors were from different public and private universities. The questions that the volunteering teachers had to answer focused mainly on how they feel about the imperativeness of implementing social justice in the EFL classrooms, if they notice any change for better among the learners while activating the lessons on social justice and if they encounter any trouble while effectuating the teaching of social justice in the EFL classrooms in their respective institutes.

4. DATA COLLECTION

I collected the required data basically from the two surveys that I conducted on the participants in the case study and the EFL teachers from different universities of Bangladesh. As I executed the case study phase of the research in the first place, I came across the data relating to how the students reacted to the incorporation of social justice into English language education. Among the learners, the transformations signifying positivity and moralization were quite noticeable, which I observed closely and recorded in detail. Subsequently, at the end of the stipulated course, I conducted the questionnaire survey that focused on the understanding, acceptance, reactions and expectations of the learners regarding social justice and English language education.

In the second stage of the study involving the English language teachers from various universities in the country, I received substantial data that explained the prevailing need, practice, approaches and challenges for enforcing social justice in the EFL settings. In the case with the EFL learners, the survey questions were orienting some categories, like none, seldom, somewhat, average, satisfactorily and always. In the same manner, the teachers responded to the queries on some alternatives, like partially agree, agree, strongly agree, disagree and neutral. The questions were designed as such for the options would provide the volunteers more liberal choices to give vent to their choices and feelings. Furthermore, the varieties of questions along with their disparate substitutes provided the researcher more wide considerations to decipher the stances of the surveyed people on the target study. They also helped to come across considerable findings that went understandably in line with the motto of the study.

4.1. Research Participants

The participants of the study comprised of both English language teachers and EFL students in two phases. In the first phase which was an action research, I sampled fifty students from seven departments of Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Bangladesh, such as Department of English, Department of Business Administration, Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Department of Civil Engineering, Department of Architecture, Department of Law and Department of Electrical Electronics and Engineering. I brought the students under an umbrella term “Teaching and Learning English for Social Justice”, which was considered the course name that the students were invited to on a first-come-first-selected basis. From each department there could be not more than eight participants. I chose the participants from disparate disciplines mainly because I wanted students coming from different academic backgrounds and having different choices and levels of competence in English. In fact, as much as social justice is concerned, I intended to make sure that there would prevail differences among the learners so as to give them an atmosphere as well as an opportunity to be tolerating to varieties and distinctions.

As to the second phase of the study, which was conducted on twenty English language teachers from total five universities including both public and private ones, I mainly focused on reaching how they feel about cultivating the teachings of social justice in the classrooms and how they consider its instant as well as long term benefits on the students and subsequently the society they live in. The teachers came from Northern University of Business and Technology Khulna, Khulna University, Rajshahi University, Millennium University and Dhaka International University. I sampled the English language teachers from different universities looking to the same purpose, which means to make sure that the findings of the study rove to be considerably reliable.

4.2. Instruments

The study utilized quite a number of instruments and materials for the purpose of preparing the questionnaires and conducting the actions research and surveys. As to the action research, the researcher had to arrange the class sessions in a classroom of the university. Some task based materials like sheets, photocopies and book pages and chapters had to be made best use of in the classroom. As for the lessons on social justice, the researcher many a time took help from sociological and historical books and writings. To keep records of the positive transformations of manner and outlook of the participants, diary and note book were used. Subsequently a questionnaire was made consisting ten questions targeting the opinions and stances of the students relating to the course on English language learning ornamented with the teaching on social justice. For composing the questionnaire, a personal computer was used. Necessary number of copies of the questionnaire was prepared. For executing the survey, pen and paper were required to use. While surveying the teachers of different universities, it was necessary to make use of a cell phone as some of the teachers and universities are quite far away from where the researchers has his job.

4.3. Findings and Analysis

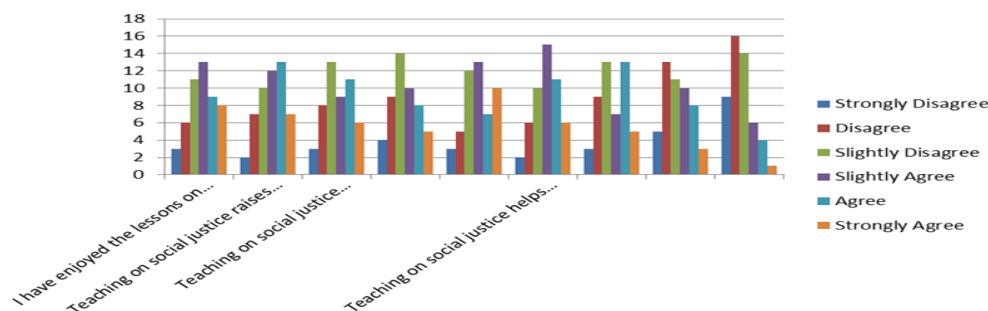


Figure-1. Chart revealing the responses of the learners on the integration of social justice into the EFL classroom.

Source: Survey findings by the researcher himself

At the end of the course, the questions that the learners had to respond to were on if they had enjoyed the lessons on social justice in the classrooms, if they believe teaching on social justice enhances confidence on personal prowess, and if social justice encourages the sense of responsibility among them. There were also questions regarding if it accelerates target language learning, if it increases tolerance and fraternity, and if the students implement the teachings of social justice in their everyday life. The queries were close ended following Likart Scale having the alternatives, like Slightly Agree, Agree, Strongly Agree, Slightly Disagree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

60% of the participants agreed to have enjoyed the lessons on social justice in the EFL classrooms to various extents while 40% disagreed to have had the same feeling. About 62% asserted the fact that their confidence regarding individual capabilities increased due to the social justice related issues in the class sessions whereas 38% disagreed at different level to have got their confidence raised. Around 52% of the respondents provided affirmative notion and 48% negative on if teaching on social justice inspires the sense of personal responsibility towards the community. Approximately 54% answered in the negative, but 46% in the affirmative as to whether the teaching on social justice directly or indirectly motivates to learn the target language more devotedly. Again, 60% of the learners indicated that they received an increased sense of tolerance and fraternity, but 40% said otherwise. The participants who reassured that social justice raised their belief relating to personal worth and value were 64%, yet 36% feel in a different way. About whether social justice provided an even-I-can-make-positive-changes-happen realization, the participants split equally. Nearly 58% disagreed and 42% agreed on the transformative role of social justice in the EFL classrooms. Regarding the activation of the outcomes of social justice lessons in real life, 78% have not started activating the teachings of social justice in the day to day life whereas 32% assured that they have already started to implement the changes in their everyday life.

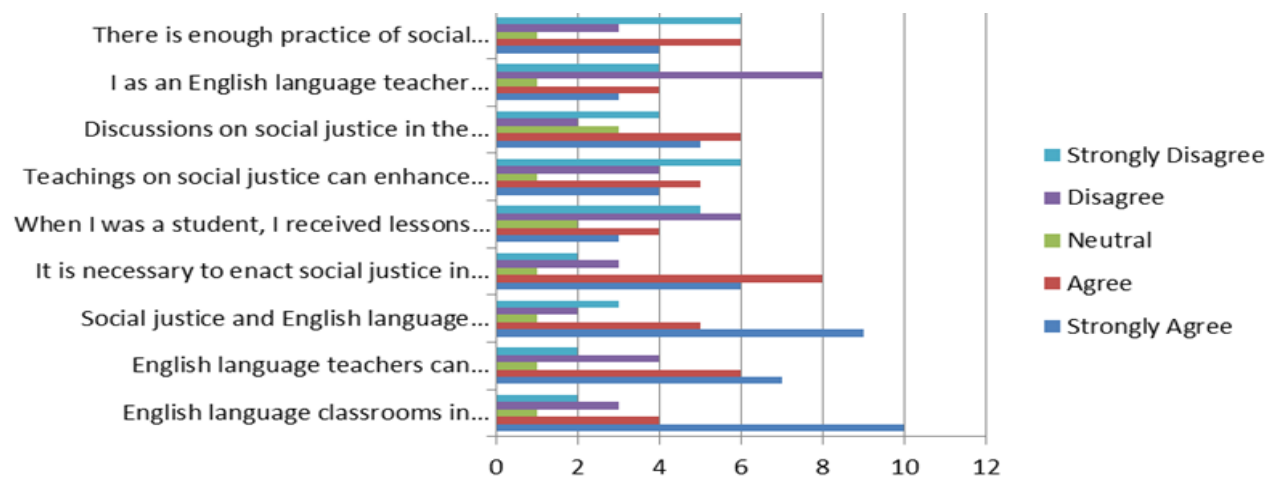


Figure-2. EFL Teachers' responses regarding the implementation of social justice education in the EFL classrooms.

Source: Survey findings by the researcher himself

The second phase of the study was operated on twenty English language teachers, who responded to the questions on if they partially agree or strongly agree or disagree or strongly disagree or remain neutral to the facts that EFL classrooms in Bangladesh have students from various backgrounds, EFL teachers have the academic sinew to materialize social justice in the classrooms, social justice and English language education can accelerate each other, implementing social justice in the EFL classrooms in Bangladesh is essential, and the likes. 70% of the participating teachers think that the EFL learners in Bangladesh come from diversified educational, social and economic backgrounds while 20% do not think the same. 65% believe that they can actualize the lessons of social justice in the EFL classrooms whereas 30% do not show interest to take the challenge. Around 70% of the participating teachers believe that social justice and English language learning can help boost each other if both are incorporated and inspired in the classrooms, but 25% of them do not believe so. Regarding if it is necessary to enact

social justice in the English language classrooms in Bangladesh, 70% of the respondents answer in the affirmative, while 25% of them in the negative. 55% of the teachers, when they were students, did not receive any lessons on social justice, whereas 35% confirm that they did. Again, 45% of the interviewees think that teachings on social justice can enhance relationship and performance among the EFL learners, although 50% oppose the idea. About 55% of the teachers support that discussions on social justice in the classrooms awaken sense of duties and responsibilities in both the teachers and learners, though 30% do not support the notion. It is heartening to know that 35% of the teachers confirm that they effectuate lessons on social justice in the classrooms, although the greater portion (60%) of them do not implement social justice related things in the classrooms. Finally, the participating language practitioners reveal whether their respective institutes have enough practice of social justice in the English education classrooms in my institute, to which 50% agree, while 45% disagree. After all, it is mentionable that 5% to 15% of the volunteering teachers remain neutral on answering the various questions.

5. LIMITATIONS

Research work on education in association with social justice in the settings of Bangladesh is almost scarce, which is why while consulting the contents on the topic I had to face some problem relating to the information constraint. On top of this, there has been next to no study on English language teaching and learning in connection with social justice in the context of the country, which made me seek materials and ideas from outer sources available in international circumstances. In the action research on the EFL learners, frequently they have to be made to understand that the teaching on rights, responsibilities, inner strengths, confidence and all other human attributes I had been teaching to them belonged to social justice, for though they were quite familiar with the ideas, the term 'social justice' seemed new to them. In conducting the survey on the EFL teachers from different universities, I failed to meet some of them personally because they live in different districts far from mine, for which I had to receive their responses on the questions over cell phone. I felt if I could meet them in person and had the questions answered, it would feel more valid.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Social justice is undoubtedly an unavoidable phenomenon that has an innate connection with education- specifically English language education- for it involves learners from multifarious contexts having disparate identities and efficiencies. Therefore, it is imperative to impart the theme of social justice among the learners on a regular basis. Many students do not seem to have idea about the term itself, which is why they fail to focus on the target. Even among some teachers, the notion of social justice does not seem to be clarified. So, it appears imperative that there should be more sessions and talks on social justice in education arenas in the settings of Bangladesh.

7. CONCLUSION

It is obvious that social justice being all about the proliferation of positive human qualities has succeeded in touching the liking of many teachers and students as well. From a little extent to a greater one, EFL instructors and learners in Bangladesh nurture affirmative notion about social justice being incorporated in English language education. Accordingly, the findings of the study inspire the implementation of the lessons of social justice in the EFL classrooms in the institutes of tertiary level of education in Bangladesh. Hence, it is decipherable that teaching and learning English can happen in an accelerated manner once teachings of social justice are connected relevantly in the classrooms. In the same manner, the inevitable human attributes corresponding to social justice can flourish among the teachers and learners if effectuated in line with education. Likewise, the explorations of the study add substantial essence to the already existing education and research on English language education and social justice

in the country. In the case of pedagogical prosperity, the combination of the ideas of social justice and language education can bring forth some appreciable innovations as well.

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