

Language teachers gone?

ready with wonderfully detailed Over-Head Transparencies and find out you there is a power outage. You have a great handout and the photocopier breaks down. Or you prepare group work for a particular class and then find yourself in a room where the desks have all been nailed down. Did I mention that the class had 250 students?

Two forums were held the first day. One on employers' perspectives of needs and standards of English and the other on ELT Issues at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Speakers as diverse as an editor of a newspaper, a publisher, a lawyer, the CEOs of a bank and of an advertising company as well as the managing director of a tobacco company, looked at the standard of English from the employers' point of view. The gist of the discussion was the low language proficiency of prospective employees and the need for better English.

The Second forum dealt with ELT (English Language Teaching) issues at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The discussion was a little more diverse here though the problem of recruiting proficient teachers came up again. There was a suggestion from one of the speakers, that more communicative books be written and made available to students. This issue also took me back, to 1995 this time, when together with three other teachers we had been asked by NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) to write a communicative English text book for Class V. We set

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to the task with gusto, visualising the change we would, in our own small way, be able to bring about in English language teaching in the schools. With typical Bangladeshi urgency we were asked to finish the book the day before we had our first meeting. But one learns to work under that sort of pressure and "if only we had more time," is the underlying cliché in almost all projects in Bangladesh. Suffice it to say that we finished the book in three months. The following year I was in my village in Chandpur and on finding out that a young cousin of mine was in grade V, I asked to see the book (perhaps hoping subconsciously to rise in her esteem). She brought me a book which looked totally alien, though the cover boldly proclaimed that it was indeed "ENGLISH FOR TODAY" and in smaller letters "For Class Five." On flipping through it I found that 90 per cent of it was written in Bangla. Do not mistake

me, I love Bangla, but my concern was in seeing it in English textbook, especially since the actual writers had refrained from using any Bangla. A ghostwriter had taken the trouble to translate all the communicative exercises and instructions into Bangla (and not too accurately). The names of the teachers had been lumped together as "written by three teachers." (I must admit this totally punctured my pride). The government books would have been distributed free of cost or at a very nominal price, but now the students were expected to pay for it. The real tragedy was that though the intention to improve had been genuine



Arifa Rahman, President of BELTA, addressing the audience in the auditorium of The British Council.