

As the world changes, so must our English education

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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Foreign Adviser M Touhid Hossain, while speaking at a recent event, shared his personal observations on what he called "educational apartheid." In his professional experience across various countries, he noticed that a lack of English proficiency forces many Bangladeshi migrant workers into menial jobs with low wages. In some cases, workers from our neighbouring countries earn three times more than ours. This highlights a key truth: the global economy values English as a skill of high currency. Yet, despite over 12 years of English language training, our schooling system fails to equip the majority of citizens with this essential skill. As a literature teacher at the tertiary level, I often face questions from employers and civil society members. I am not a language policymaker nor a materials developer. Still, I cannot ignore my responsibility when a coaching centre boasts that a six-month course can offer more valuable skills than a four-year degree in English.

The idea arose when British Council, as a sponsor of a two-day international conference on transforming English language teaching, came to Dhaka University. Its business director

deciding factor between securing a well-paying job or remaining in low-wage labour. It is disheartening that our workers struggle not due to a lack of talent but because they lack the language skills necessary to seize opportunities. For the same reason, there are thousands of top-level managers from India and Sri Lanka working in our factories and business outlets.

This linguistic gap titillates donors and foreign organisations to promise modules and aptitude tests. Traditionally, they have been successful in selling such programmes easily to opportunist bureaucrats or corrupt political leaders through their imported experts. Expats often supervise the preparation of materials for our national curriculum, promoting models like communicative English and experiential learning. However, when we compare textbooks for our local students with those from native English-speaking countries, the discrepancy is glaring. Our curriculum has been systematically dumbed down.

Conversely, when our students aspire to higher education abroad, English language proficiency

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mentioned a recent survey result: 34 percent of employers in Bangladesh prioritise English skills when hiring. This statistic underlines the widening gap between the job market's demands and the skills our education system provides. Given that English is the primary language of ICT and is spoken by 1.5 billion people worldwide, proficiency in English is often the

requirements become increasingly stringent. So they must enrol in a coaching programme and pay hefty fees multiple times to demonstrate their linguistic competence. All for money. Do foreign missions have the authority to engage in commercial activities? Do these foreign agencies pay taxes? Curious minds want to know.

the apex body created by statute to enrol lawyers, fix and prepare conditions of enrolment and discipline in legal practice in Bangladesh—for the terms 1995-98 and 2001-04. She was also a member of Bangladesh Labour Law Reform Commission in 1991-95, and in 1985, she served as the regional vice-president of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA).

I could say she did so by representing Bangladesh at the United Nations General Assembly in 1978, where she was allocated to the Third Committee to work on the drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). She was then among those who mobilised the feminist movement in Bangladesh to pressure the state to ratify CEDAW. I could say she did so by becoming the UN's first special rapporteur on human trafficking in 2004, producing technical reports and setting global standards to help combat sexual trafficking of women and children. These continue to be cited and applied globally even today. She conducted missions to and held bilateral negotiations with the governments in countries where women and children were most at risk of trafficking—from Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Lebanon to Thailand, Japan and Nigeria. Her groundbreaking 2006 report presented before the 62nd session of the UN Commission on Human Rights dispelled several misconceptions that operated against women in prostitution at the legal and institutional levels, and established how the demand for prostitution drives sexual trafficking.

I could say she did so by being the first woman in Bangladesh to establish and become a partner of a law firm in 1971, Chancery Chambers, which would go on to become a leading law firm in the country. She then went on to become one of the first women to hold leadership positions in the two most important lawyers' associations in the country: as member and assistant secretary of the Supreme Court Bar Association, and twice elected as a member of

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