Tasks for the transition: Identifying the practical English-language needs of Bangladeshi high-school students

Todd H. McKay

The purpose of my pre-dissertation research this summer was to identify the tasks for which students need English at public and private universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Information regarding students' English-language needs at the tertiary level can then be used to design, implement, and evaluate an intensive summer English program for high-school students at Notre Dame College to help prepare high-school students for the rigors of university life, and hopefully make the transition a little bit easier. My research makes two important contributions to the field of Bangladesh Studies. First, it adds to the (currently) very small set of studies that examines students' English use in Bangladesh. Second, it is the first to examine students' needs in the form of real-world tasks (e.g., filling out admission forms, creating PowerPoint slides, sending e-mails, etc.), making a list of these available to university faculty and staff for the practical purposes of designing pre-admission programs.

Although English-language programs can be found throughout Dhaka, very few studies report on the process of identifying students' needs (so-called needs analyses) for the purposes of designing and developing programs. What this dearth means for the broader community of English researchers and educators in Bangladesh is that there are few readily available examples of how to go about the needs-analysis process. My research provides a very clear, very accessible guide to English teachers on how to go about isolating a set of needs with which to design curricula, teaching and learning materials, and assessments; I take care to document the methodology—along with the rationale behind certain decisions—of the needs analysis that local English teachers might learn from the process.

Additionally, this is the first needs analysis that looks at real-world tasks instead of grammatical structures or communicative functions. University students are required to perform certain tasks in English in the course of their studies, and, by designing courses around these tasks, we can establish a direct, continuous link between what students are exposed to in high-school or pre-university programs and what they need to accomplish to succeed in university life. Crucially, by focusing on what students can or cannot do in English (tasks)—instead of how 'native-like' they sound—we create equal opportunities for student success irrespective of medium-of-instruction (English, Bangla, or English-version) background or proficiency level.

The different situations for which students' (about 250 across two public and private universities in Dhaka) identify needing English include applying for a job, debating issues, delivering presentation or speech, initiating university life, managing course logistics, opening a bank account, reading and understanding print instructions, understanding a course lecture, and writing an essay. Though just how important English is for each of these situations will undoubtedly vary from institution to institution, moving forward, researchers and English practitioners in Bangladesh can use this list to help design and develop courses to help their students succeed in their university endeavors.