

From Passive Learners to Critical Thinkers: Preparing EFL Students for University Success

Many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who seek admittance to a university where English is the medium of instruction do not have sufficient language skills to understand lectures, comprehend textbooks, participate in class discussions, or generate satisfactory written work. Oftentimes, they have only experienced teacher-centered instruction, where they were passive learners or mere memorizers of rules. Critical thinking was not a part of the curriculum, and they did not have the opportunity to develop metacognitive strategies to help them organize, plan, and make decisions about their learning. For these reasons, some universities offer foundation or pre-university programs to help students improve their language skills; however, students need support in more than just language skills because in the university environment they are expected to think, to reason, to communicate, and to continue their learning outside the classroom.

After reviewing its own pre-university program, the Centre for Languages (CfL) at BRAC University realized that the program needed a stronger focus on the academic challenges of university study. In response, the centre identified and implemented methods to strengthen the pre-university program to better prepare students for higher education. This article describes how a group of teachers thoroughly revised the pre-university curriculum to create lessons and activities that now equip students with the critical thinking ability and English language skills required for regular university classes.

Background of BRAC

The Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC), one of the largest nongovernmental development organizations in the world, founded BRAC University in 2001 to provide students with the critical skills necessary to meet the needs of this developing country (see www.bracuniversity.ac.bd/about). Because

BRAC University is an English medium university, its Cfl offers English language education for the entire student body. In Bangladesh, most universities have mixed ability classes, but BRAC University is unique because of a placement process that is based on the student's proficiency level. English language classes are required, and applicants are evaluated on their oral and written skills and placed in one of the five modules that focus on speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

The Cfl's pre-university program also makes BRAC University unique. To be eligible for pre-university classes, the students must pass all the other subjects on the admittance test. To determine their English language placement, they complete a written essay and are interviewed by an English language teacher. Students must attend the twelve-week pre-university program for five days a week, three hours per day, and pass the courses to gain admission to the university. Because most pre-university students are from Bangla medium schools, and thus did not have the same opportunities to learn English as students from other schools, a serious concern arose about whether the pre-university program was meeting the students' needs. As a result, the director of Cfl asked an English Language Fellow to review the program's course work and teaching practices. The evaluation found that the program was grammar-based with little integration of the skills of speaking, listening, writing, and reading. Several suggestions were made on how to revise key components of the curriculum and fulfill the main objective of the pre-university program, which was to help students be successful in their university studies.

Planning for curricular change

The suggested changes to the curriculum included integrating the speaking and listening and the writing and reading language skills, teaching grammar in context, adding lessons to spur critical thinking and authentic communication, and modifying assessment practices. The director of the department agreed with the suggestions, and a planning group was formed. The group consisted of a teaching assistant and nine instructors, including the department leads for composition/reading skills and speaking/listening

skills. Although this was a large group, it was felt that all the instructors should be involved in the decision making and should have input on the design of the program.

The director of the department attended some of the meetings as an observer and received reports from the planning group. Her most important role was recognizing the work both of the group and of individuals while also providing positive feedback to the instructors who were trying out new ideas and methods. She kept the university administration informed about the program changes and the decisions that the planning group made.

At the beginning, the planning group was concerned about how the students would adjust to new instructional methods. The teachers reviewed the curriculum with the students and carefully explained the changes and benefits of the new pre-university program. The students then brainstormed about how being a university student would be different from being a secondary school student. Next, they described a successful university student while the teacher listed their ideas on the board. The students had so many ideas that the teachers ran out of board space and time. These descriptions were subsequently incorporated into program activities, such as when the writing instructor assigned a writing task based on an essay by Akers (1998) that listed the steps for becoming a successful university student. In another activity that capitalized on these descriptions, students reflected on their future goals and then drew a picture of how they imagined themselves later in their careers. They started slowly but were soon very involved and drawing in great detail. They enjoyed telling their classmates about their pictures and how they were going to reach their goals. The instructor then papered the walls of the department with these pictures of judges, musicians, CEOs, and teachers.

The needs assessment

An immediate task for the planning group was to design and administer a needs assessment to gather information on how the students like to learn, how they use English outside the classroom, how they self-assess their speaking and writing skills, and the nature of their future fields of study and career plans.

This information is vital to create a learner-centered curriculum and to select methods and topics that are relevant to the students' interests and goals. For example, many of the students wanted to go to graduate school in an English-speaking country, so this need was linked to the lessons. Students were also asked to write about their favorite and not-so-favorite learning experiences, which gave the teachers feedback about successful instructional techniques as well as information about each student's true writing ability in a non-testing situation. Based on the original pre-university program evaluation, the planning meeting, and the student needs assessment, important changes, as described below, were made to the curriculum.

Creating an interactive classroom environment

The need to make classes more interactive was a major focus for all components of the newly revised curriculum. The rationale for an emphasis on interaction was based on the idea expressed by Bruffee (1984) that for people to think well, they must first learn to converse and reason in their community. If students have a rich social context in the form of discussion and collaboration, then this context will cue the cognitive action that is necessary for writing and speaking (Bruffee 1984). Therefore, group work was instituted to allow students to converse in their pre-university community and to prepare them for the extensive, high-level writing and presenting that takes place in the larger university community.

It is important to note that when teachers design group work for young people, they sometimes forget that not all students have the skills or experience to perform in groups. If group work was not part of their previous educational experience, students need strategies to help them collaborate with others. Therefore, the teachers decided to introduce students to simple group work strategies, such as showing that they are listening to the speaker by making eye contact and nodding, and by saying such things as "What do you think?" or "I like that idea." These skills are simple but important, as they allow all students an opportunity to effectively participate in group discussions. Using an additional strategy, the

teachers assigned the more outgoing students to work with the quieter students. The teaching assistant also helped to coach the groups and encouraged the quieter students to speak.

To enhance the quality of discourse in group work, the teachers moved away from routine activities and exercises that filled time but did not encourage the students to become independent learners. This entailed carefully choosing activities that can only be accomplished with collaboration and serious conversations, including comparing and contrasting information, summarizing readings, debating and argument essays, composing biographies and autobiographies, conducting interviews, and making presentations. These and other activities were represented in all classes to give students plenty of time to engage with their classmates and extend their independent use of English outside the classroom.

Strategies for integrating the four skills

Skill integration was a priority because the instructors wanted the pre-university classes to resemble the actual university, where language skills are not practiced separately but instead all language skills are used in every class, such as when students react both orally and in writing to an article they have read.

The task of integrating the speaking/listening and writing/reading classes was informed by Rebecca Oxford's image of a language class as a tapestry woven of different strands, where the primary skills of speaking, listening, writing, and reading are "one of the most crucial of these strands" (Oxford 2001, 2). If these four skills are separated from one another, a language is taught; however, if they are integrated with each other, authentic communication is taught (Oxford 2001).

The four strategies described below were used to successfully implement four-skill integration.

1. Coordinate the curriculum for all classes.

Previously, each teacher created her own lesson plans and decided what to teach and when to teach it. In the redesigned program, teachers focused on sequencing the activities and levels of difficulty. If the writing/reading instructors were teaching the students how to write a formal argument and support their

claims, the speaking/listening teachers were also focusing on how to support an argument orally, using the same process with small group debate work. All teachers used similar themes that were carefully selected to help the students become successful university students.

2. Provide oral and written feedback on writing.

Since writing in a second language is typically a difficult task, extra effort was put into designing a feedback system for the students. In addition to the written feedback on papers, which emphasized what the students did well and what they could improve, the teachers provided individual oral feedback, and tutorial sessions were scheduled for those who needed extra help. All instructors were expected to interact orally with students about the difficulties, successes, and new ideas gained from a writing assignment.

3. Maintain guided journals.

Journal writing encourages students to use metacognitive learning strategies so they can realize success, identify genuine problems, and increase motivation. Each week the students responded to the following prompts that are adapted from Nunan's (1996, 36) techniques for guided journal writing:

- This week I learned:
- This week I spoke English with these people:
- My strong points are:
- My difficulties are:
- I would like help with:
- My learning and practicing plans for next week are:

The students were given small spiral notebooks to write in, and this inexpensive gift was received with smiles and excitement. After students wrote in them, the teachers responded to each journal, with some positive and empathetic comments. According to Peyton and Reed (1990), this type of journal writing encourages students to reflect on, discuss, and plan their language learning. Journal writing also helps the teacher because she can use the information for lesson planning.

4. Institute peer review activities.

Since peer review provides students with valuable feedback and teaches them to help each other, the students were encouraged to openly discuss their difficulties and achievements with the writing process. To ensure success, they were taught how to give oral and written feedback by using terms such as "did well" and "could improve," and how to receive critiques without being defensive. Since students were writing multiple drafts, peer review was an important opportunity to check early drafts for the inclusion of structural discourse elements such as a thesis statement, a topic sentence, or support for a claim. The use of peer review helped the students reach the goal of becoming independent learners, and it helped the teacher to assess their English productive skills. Bruffee's (1984) ideas on discourse, which apply to both spoken and written skills, offered new insights into peer review and the importance of letting conversation about the assignment and writing in general take precedence over mechanics such as spelling and punctuation. His distinction between *normal discourse* (traditional and accepted ideas) and *abnormal discourse* (discourse that challenges existing ideas and initiates new ones) was essential to incorporating peer review into the curriculum and learning how to freely explore the writing process through authentic communication (Bruffee 1984).

Integrating critical thinking in the classroom

The planning group agreed that critical thinking was paramount and should be integrated throughout the curriculum, a task that was made easier by the concomitant emphasis on interaction and skill integration. The teachers borrowed many ideas from Bean (1996), an excellent source for critical thinking activities. By the end of the program's first semester, the book's pages were smudged and worn.

The ability to think critically is especially important for students living in a country with political and socioeconomic problems, for it

will help them to look at issues from different viewpoints and become independent thinkers and responsible citizens. An important technique to get students to look at both sides of an issue is based on Elbow's (1986) *believing and doubting game*. In this activity, students work in pairs and take turns supporting and arguing against the same issue. As they determine what is wrong with an argument they must also focus on the merits of the opposite position. This activity encourages students to put themselves in another's shoes and to have empathy with another's opinion. At the end of the activity each student attempts to guess his or her partner's true belief, and students try their best to fool their partners. This culminated in whoops of celebration whenever a student succeeded in hiding the truth.

Another popular critical thinking exercise was connected with the viewing of the documentary *Bostrobalikara: Garment Girls of Bangladesh* (Mokammel 2007). The film was shown in segments, with discussion following each part. After viewing the entire documentary, students divided into groups representing textile manufacturers, government regulators, foreign purchasers, members of an international ethical trade committee, and the garment workers themselves. Each group role-played and applied their particular stakeholder's point of view while working together to solve the problems demonstrated in the documentary.

The enhancement class: Introducing new experiences and ideas

A special enhancement class was added to the curriculum to expose the students to issues they had not encountered before and to challenge them to react to difficult and controversial topics. The teachers were always searching for special types of activities or speakers for this class. In the needs assessment, for example, many students mentioned a concern about drug use; therefore, the Cfl director invited the leader of a drug rehabilitation center and two recovering addicts to meet with the students. The teachers had never seen such a large number of students pay such rapt attention and ask so many questions.

A university teacher from Thailand was also a guest speaker in the enhancement class. After the writing teacher showed a film

on Thailand's most important holiday, the students, who had been working on their interview skills, asked the Thai teacher questions. They had a wonderful time and cheered for each other's questions and for the visitor's answers. It was a fun activity that also exposed the students to a different culture and religion.

Teaching grammar in context

Although some classes, such as the enhancement class, were added, the stand-alone grammar class was eliminated. Grammar instruction was integrated into all the classes and taught in the context of activities. The students were encouraged to recognize grammar points in the various language exercises and activities they completed and to create the rules rather than memorizing them. Instead of being taught as a theoretical system, grammar was taught as a communication tool. What better way to review past tense than to read a biography, which is written in that tense, and then interview a family member and write and tell that person's history in the past tense? If the students were learning to write a persuasive essay, they would learn how to recognize and use conditional *if* clauses, cause and effect *because* clauses, and modal auxiliaries in the context of expressing attitudes. This type of in-context grammar instruction also encourages students to continue their grammar education outside the classroom, when reading the newspaper or their favorite novel.

Like grammar, the teaching of discourse conventions like paragraph unity, transitions, and cohesion, as well as mechanics like spelling and punctuation, was integrated into the lessons at logical places and not taught directly as a stand-alone activity. Students noticed how punctuation was used and in groups discussed the rules as they came up. For example, the appropriate use of quotation marks was integrated into the unit on biographies, and when students were composing essays and oral reports, it was a natural time for them to emphasize the importance of transitional phrases. Over time students became proficient in set rules that they could apply to a variety of writing assignments.

Alternative methods of assessment

Another substantive change to the curriculum originated because of the strong desire to

change the pre-university testing paradigm. The instructors rejected anxiety-producing discrete point testing in favor of evaluation that resulted in *positive washback*, which refers to the fact that assessment can be fun, rewarding, non-stressful, and supportive of learning. The teachers wanted assessment to encourage students to become autonomous and thinking young adults, and they embraced practices such as *formative assessment*, which measures progress periodically throughout the course. For example, when teaching writing as a process of brainstorming, planning, drafting, and revising, the instructors felt that each of those elements should be assessed with the students' participation, as opposed to administering a traditional timed essay test as a midterm or final exam.

Portfolio assessment was another useful method for evaluation that required students to become actively involved by filing their work products in binders. This created interest and motivation because the students were in charge of gathering the results of their hard work and discussing it with the teacher. Each student wrote a reflective introduction to the portfolio to assess how his or her written work had improved and changed over the semester. The students' reflection, self-appraisal, and interaction with the teacher made them participants in the assessment process.

For mid-term and final exams students were evaluated by group work and presentations to the class, some of the same skills that would be essential for attending the university. Although performance testing like this can be stressful, it becomes less so when it revolves around familiar tasks. Since there had been so much emphasis on group work, for the mid-term the students were divided into groups of five to discuss a local, national, or international issue, and they were evaluated on their oral and group work skills.

For the final speaking exam, the students were asked to use their new interviewing skills to question a person whom they admired but who was not part of their family. The choices of interviewees were excellent: those hoping to major in business interviewed bankers and presidents of companies, and five students interviewed different freedom fighters from the 1971 War of Liberation. A set of twins both interviewed the same television producer,

which at first caused concern; however, because of their diverse interests, both young men approached the interview from a different perspective, and it was as if they had interviewed two different people. Finally, the students presented the results of their interview to the class, and they were outstanding. Even the very casual students dressed up for the presentations, and one young man related that his mother and grandmother laughed when they saw him because he so seldom wore dress clothes.

Course curriculum evaluation

The pre-university program also conducted formative assessment of the new curriculum so that any changes could be made while instruction was in progress. The students were asked to evaluate their classes each month using "did well" and "could improve" statements, and the teachers used these evaluations to make changes and improve future lessons. As the semester progressed, the students became more critical and gave the teachers some excellent feedback.

Results of new curriculum: Student perspective

The students readily adapted to the critical thinking, enhancement, and writing classes. As is typical with the speaking skill, they were initially hesitant, but when they had the opportunity to express their opinions on relevant academic and social issues, they soon forgot about their shyness. The large amount of positive feedback from the students had a lot to do with the effort, enthusiasm, and attitudes of the teachers. According to Singer (1986), a climate of warmth and empathy "may be the single most important factor in determining how well your students learn" (32). "A large body of research shows that if a teacher is warm, caring, and enthusiastic, the students learn more" (Singer 1986, 33). The teachers were constantly praising and reinforcing the students, especially about the way they were meeting challenges and adjusting to the university curriculum. This positive reinforcement may have been the biggest reason that students so readily accepted this new way of learning.

Results of new curriculum: Teacher perspective

Teachers felt that the curricular changes to the pre-university program solved numerous

problems. Group work was more successful, there was more interaction and critical thinking, and the students' language skills improved. From the teachers' perspective, the hardest adjustment was teaching grammar in context. It is so much easier to present rules and to give the students pages of exercises. Nevertheless, the instructors became adept at selecting materials that contained pertinent examples of the grammar that students needed to see and hear.

Overall, the teachers were amazed at the students' progress, and this inspired them to seek out challenging, interesting, and authentic materials. They were especially impressed with how the students were able to look at issues from different points of view and to offer creative answers to problems. Even the shyest students started to get up in front of the class and provide evidence to support a position and then provide evidence to support the very opposite point. The teachers often came back to the department office saying, "You won't believe this."

After a group of pre-university students entered the regular university, it became apparent that an unidentified problem had been solved by the new curriculum: the students became extremely confident. Previously, it had been easy for regular university instructors to distinguish between students who came from English medium schools and those who came from Bangla medium schools. The former group did the talking, while the latter group sat silently, and there was a social division between them. But after students who had attended the newly revised pre-university program were admitted to the university, instructors there reported that the usually "silent" students from Bangla medium schools were involved and active in class and were providing feedback on the class curriculum. In their university English language classes, they were more advanced than some of the other students. The problem that CfL faces is how to keep these students adequately challenged in the regular university English modules.

Conclusion

BRAC University's experience with curricular reform should be heartening to all teachers who have students who want to attend an English medium university, either in their own country or abroad. The program's

basic components can be duplicated in a pre-university program, and the core principles apply to other language programs as well.

A main reason for the success of the curriculum revision is attributable to advanced planning and collaboration. The decision to include all the instructors in the planning group was a wise one. They were dedicated to the program's success, and they willingly attended the weekly meetings to discuss the curriculum, the student feedback, and what was going well and what should be improved. In addition, the instructors would gather informally on an almost daily basis to discuss new material that had been discovered. As part of the decision making group, all the pre-university instructors felt responsible for the success of the program. Since the teaching assistant was also part of the group, she was able to keep the changing materials and the lesson plans up to date. It is important that one person in the planning group have this role, so that an organized record is preserved.

To develop a program that will help students reach their goal of becoming successful university students, the following factors should also be considered:

- The students should be consulted on their needs through a needs assessment and ongoing evaluations.
- The teachers need to work as a team, teaching the same topics and interacting with the students in a positive way.
- The teachers need to make an extra effort to find or create materials that meet the students' needs and interests.
- The important element of critical thinking should be integrated into every class and most activities. This skill will help students in their education and as parents, spouses, employees, and citizens.

When these factors are included in curriculum development for a pre-university program, the result will be enthusiastic, confident, and successful university students. Rather than looking at the program as a barrier to university life, the students will see it as a gateway to their university career.

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