

The effectiveness of SSC English syllabus in motivating students to achieve communicative competence: A case study

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Abstract

This study aims at examining the effectiveness of present Secondary School Certificate (SSC) English syllabus in order to find out what role this syllabus plays in motivating students to achieve communicative competence. Using a mixed-method approach, I conducted this study by collecting data from eighty seven students of SSC level through a questionnaire, and from five English teachers by interviewing them. This study revealed that most of the students of SSC level are not motivated enough to achieve communicative competence, rather they memorize selected answers provided by their teachers or from their guide-books to secure a good Grade Point Average (GPA) in SSC examination. It further revealed that the present syllabus is effective in making students motivated only to some extent, and that is because of some activities provided in the syllabus. But yet students have not been able to achieve communicative competence as they do not practise these activities properly. Based on these findings, some steps have been recommended to overcome this problem.

Keywords Communicative competence, CLT, GTM, Motivation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Syllabus Design plays a crucial role in learning and teaching. Specifically, SSC English syllabus of Bangladesh has been a crucial issue in the field of research. SSC examination is a public examination in Bangladesh in which English is a compulsory subject and usually students of 10th grade or class ten attend this examination. The government of Bangladesh has made English language learning compulsory with the purpose of enabling students to use English in real-life situations. Among the few objectives of the present SSC English syllabus, one objective is that students will be able to acquire the four language skills “for effective communication in real life situations” (National Curriculum, 2012: 74). Despite the CLT-based English syllabus, students of Bangladesh do



not seem competent enough in English communication. Moreover, this syllabus seems inadequate to create students' motivation in achieving communicative competence. Students are mostly seen to be eager only to pass the exam or to get GPA-5. Hossain (2012) points out that students' lack of motivation is one of the major causes behind the failure of students' achieving communicative competence. So, I assumed that the items and activities included in English syllabus should be determined in such a way that students at SSC level will be motivated enough to achieve communicative competence as English is the medium of communication in many national and international companies and is also necessary to get higher education in other countries. This thought led me to evaluate the effectiveness of the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus. Roy (2016) mentioned in his research that the goal of CLT has not been achieved yet in Bangladesh as there is a big gap between the objective of CLT-based English syllabus and how it is assessed. So, I would like to examine, through this study, how much the students of SSC level are motivated to achieve communicative competence following this CLT-based syllabus. The aim of my study is to find out whether the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus motivates students to achieve communicative skills.

1.1. Secondary English syllabus: Its history and objective

The English syllabus at SSC level was based on Grammar Translation Method (GTM) for decades where students played a passive role, and teacher was the supreme authority in the classroom. At that time, the emphasis was given only on teaching and learning grammar. This grammar-based English syllabus had been followed at SSC level until 1996. Later, there was a shift from GTM to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) "with a view to achieving communicative purposes" (Roy, 2016: 225). Basically, in Bangladesh, CLT replaced GTM and came into practice in 1990s and it was introduced at SSC level in 1996 (National Curriculum, 2012).

Kabir (2015) depicted that when CLT was introduced in Bangladesh, the change was not done entirely in all components of the curriculum and this "partial implementation can be termed a potential cause of the present mismatch in language teaching in Bangladesh" (Kabir, 2015: 10).

So, in order to achieve the goal of CLT, there should be a connection between what is included in syllabus plan and what is practised in the classroom. As Nunan (1988) stated that the principles of CLT should be reflected "in classroom activities, patterns of classroom interaction, and in tests of communicative performance" (Nunan, 1988: 5-6).

1.2. Implication for this study

The present CLT-based SSC English syllabus has been introduced with the

purpose that students will be able to use English in real-life situation (National Curriculum, 2012). But it seems that students memorize all the items prescribed in their English syllabus.

However, as far as I studied, I found that there has been no significant study on the SSC English syllabus in Bangladesh in order to see whether the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus plays any role in motivating students to learn communicative competence. Therefore, further investigation is needed. In this study, I want to depict to what extent the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus motivates the students to achieve communicative competence.

2. Literature review

Hossain (2012) made an elaborate study on the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus and observed that this syllabus includes some items that may help the students practise reading and writing skills. Yet students are not able to communicate in English. He pointed out some possible causes behind this inability of students to communicate in English such as the untrained teachers, uninteresting contents of English book, “students’ poor performance, lacking in the teacher-student interaction and above all, some lacking in the syllabus” (Hossain, 2012: 15).

2.1. Motivation: definition and kinds

Gardner (1985) defines motivation as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language” (as cited in Long, Ming & Chen, 2013: 137). It is the internal drive that forces someone to do something so that she or he can achieve something (Harmer, 2001).

Long, Ming, and Chen (2013) discussed in their study about Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) distinction of two types of motivation. One is instrumental motivation, and another one is integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation is related to the concrete or practical gain that a learner can make through learning a second language. On the other hand, integrative motivation pushes a learner to learn a target language so that she or he can become a part of target language community.

2.2. Impact of motivation on English teaching and learning

Several studies (Long, Ming & Chen, 2013; Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011; Salim & Kabir, 2014) were carried out in order to see the impact of motivation on English teaching and learning. The findings of these studies have shown that motivation has an outstanding impact on English teaching and learning. Oroujlou and Vahedi (2011) mentioned that motivation is the factor that mostly affects students’ efficiency in English language learning. Again, Salim

and Kabir (2014) showed similar argument that no matter how high the students' aptitude is, they will not be successful language learners if they are not motivated enough. The finding of this study showed that teaching materials and classroom environment are highly demotivating for the students in Bangladesh.

So, it is clear that the more the students are motivated, the more they will be able to gain communicative competence in English.

2.3. Communicative competence

The term 'communicative competence' was first coined by Dell Hymes. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), communicative competence talks about "what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 159). Hymes's view of communicative competence includes both the knowledge of language and the ability to use that language (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Canale and Swain's definition (1980) of communicative competence consists of four components such as grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (as cited in Karim, 2004). According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), "The most obvious characteristic of CLT is that almost everything that is done is done with a communicative intent" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 129).

However, the above literature review shows that the inadequacy of English books and lack of well-trained language teachers are the main causes behind students' failure to use English in real life situation. But these literatures shown above have ignored the fact that students at SSC level are not motivated enough to achieve communicative competence in spite of having CLT-based syllabus and well-trained teachers. So, I would like to examine the effectiveness of SSC English syllabus in motivating students to achieve communicative competence.

3. Data collection methodology

In this study, the participants were eighty seven students of SSC level and five English teachers who teach at SSC level. I collected quantitative data through a questionnaire that has been designed for students of SSC level, and qualitative data by interviewing five English teachers. However, numerical data are not always enough "to draw conclusions about the problem under study" (Dornyei, 2007: 164). For that reason, I used mixed-method approach to find out the views and opinions of the participants, and "what they think or how they feel about something" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009: 446).

3.1. Research questions (RQ)

The research questions that I designed were:

- a. What role does the present SSC English syllabus play in motivating students to achieve communicative competence?
- b. How much does the present SSC English syllabus motivate students to gain communicative skills in English?

3.2. Instruments

In this study, I used two survey instruments-questionnaire and interview. The questionnaire designed for the students includes twelve close-ended questions. I also interviewed five English teachers teaching at SSC level by following a structured interview so that they can “expand on answers that are particularly important” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009: 119). The interviewed teachers have been coded as T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5 following Richards’ (2003) model.

4. Data analysis and discussion

4.1. Analysis of students’ questionnaire

4.1.1. RQ1. *What role does the present SSC English syllabus play in motivating students to achieve communicative competence?*

Some questions of students’ questionnaire were designed to examine what role the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus plays in motivating students to achieve communicative competence.

At first, I attempted to find out the reasons behind students’ learning English in order to know what kind of motivation the students of SSC level possess. The four options given to the students have been measured by four Likert scale (1= to pass the examination, 2= to use English in communication, 3= to be able to admit at foreign universities for doing higher studies, 4= to have a better job) and participants have to choose only one option among these options. The following figure shows the percentage of students’ responses regarding the reasons behind their learning English:

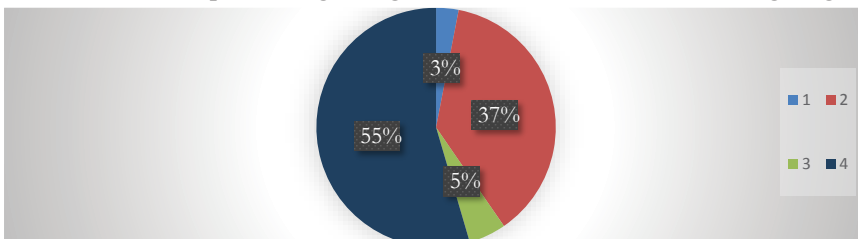


Figure 1: Reasons behind students’ learning English

The figure 1 illustrates that 55% students learn English in order to have a better job, 37% students learn English so that they can use it in communication, while only 5% and 3% students learn English in order to be able to admit themselves at foreign universities for pursuing higher studies and to pass the examination respectively.

Then I tried to assess how often students of SSC level practise speaking and listening skills in their classroom. The percentage of students' responses has been presented in the following table 1:

Table 1: Students' practice on spoken and listening skill

How often students have practice on speaking and listening skills in their classroom	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	0%	12%	15%	73%

Table 1 shows that most of the participants have never practised speaking and listening skills in their classroom, while a small number of students stated that they practise these two skills in their classroom rarely and sometimes. It is so because speaking and listening skills are not assessed in the examination (Roy, 2016). Even the present SSC English syllabus does not contain any specific activities for improving students' speaking and listening skills.

Then I attempted to know how the students of SSC level practise the items or activities that their English syllabus contains. The following figure shows how the students learn paragraph writing, Letter, completing story, gap-filling, composition etc.

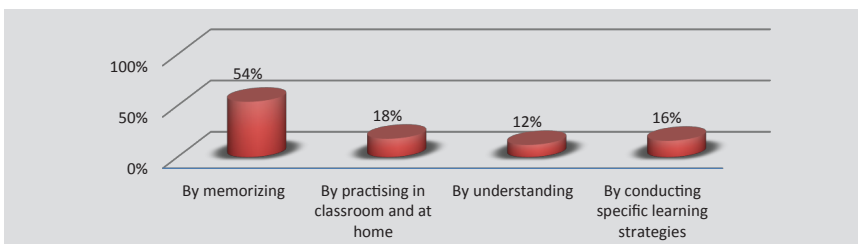


Figure 2: Students' ways of learning activities

Figure 2 illustrates that the number of students who learn the items by memorizing is more than the number of students who learn the items by practising, or understanding, or conducting specific learning strategies. This illustration shows that most of the students continue “memorizing answers to the probable questions” (Kabir, 2015: 17) which is totally opposite to the goal of the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus.

In order to know how much the activities included in SSC English

syllabus help the students to speak English fluently, students were given four possible options to choose one from them. The following table has been designed to show it clearly:

Table 2: The extent of students' ability to speak English

	The extent to which students are able to speak English	Percentage
1.	I can speak English inside and outside the classroom	4%
2.	I can speak English inside the classroom but not outside of it	13%
3.	I feel nervous while trying to speak English	45%
4.	I cannot speak English at all	38%

Table 2 shows that the number of students who believe that they can speak English is very poor, and most of the students expressed that they cannot speak English properly, although they follow a CLT-based English syllabus.

4.1.2. How much does the present SSC English syllabus motivate students to gain communicative skills in English?

Some questions of students' questionnaire were framed in order to assess how students of SSC level take preparation for the activities prescribed in their syllabus, and how they attempt these activities in the examination so that I may know whether the activities prescribed in SSC English syllabus are appropriate in motivating students to achieve communicative competence.

However, it has been found that a small number of students take preparation for 'completing story' and 'paragraph writing' by trying to write on their own, while majority of the students take preparation for these activities by memorizing some selected stories provided by their teachers, and a very small number of students care to know how to write a story or a paragraph. The students who try to write on their own may develop writing skill, but students of this kind are fewer in number.

It is also found that most of the students take preparation for 'dialogue writing' activity by memorizing some dialogues from prescribed books, while some students take preparation by trying to write dialogues on their own or learning how to write a dialogue. But no students take preparation for 'dialogue writing' by playing the roles presented in dialogues in their classroom. So, it is clear that the purpose of introducing this activity has not been fulfilled.

On the other hand, teachers make their students prepared for 'gap filling with right forms of verbs' in several ways. Most of the students stated that their teachers make them understand grammatical rules, some are made to memorize grammatical rules or memorize the answer of some chosen 'gap filling' activity from textbook or guide-books. Based on this, it can be said

that ‘gap filling with right forms of verbs’ activity helps most of the students, but partially, acquire grammatical knowledge which is also a part of communicative competence. One of the objectives of present CLT-based SSC English syllabus is to enable students “to acquire necessary grammar competence in English language” (National Curriculum, 2012: 74). But some of them are made to memorize grammatical rules which is not expected at all.

However, in order to know how students answer different activities in the examination, I have set only one question regarding ‘summarizing’ part of ‘unseen passage’ so that I can assess to what extent the present SSC English syllabus motivates students to achieve communicative competence. It is found that most of the students answer the ‘summarizing’ part of ‘unseen passage’ by writing down some exact lines from the unseen passage, and some of the students write the ‘summarizing’ part by recalling what they memorized or try to write the main points of unseen passage, while a small number of students try to write down what they have understood from reading the unseen passage. So, it is understood that this ‘summarizing’ activity prescribed in SSC English syllabus does not play any significant role in enabling students to achieve communicative competence.

4.2. Analysis of interview

I interviewed five English teachers teaching at secondary level. Their opinions regarding the present SSC English syllabus in motivating students to achieve communicative competence all described below.

T1 has stated that students will easily be motivated, if the teacher can make them practise communicative activities in an interesting way. He has also been asked how his students react when he tries to make them practise those activities that will improve their communicative skills. In responding to this question, he said, “the students who possess higher level of understanding can respond well, and react positively”. T2 asserted that when she tries to make her students practise some communicative activities, they do not show any interests. According to her, students are mostly seen “to memorize everything without understanding anything to get good marks.” T3 remarked that under the present SSC English syllabus students are mostly motivated “to memorize and copy from their friends in the examination.” He also expressed that when he tries “to make the classroom environment appropriate for practising communicative activities, students’ reaction is not good or the expected one. T4 said that students are not motivated to develop their communicative skills, they only want to secure a good GPA in the examination. T5 remarked that her students are not motivated enough to

achieve communicative skills. When she tries to make them practise communicative activities in the classroom, “they do not show any interest, and want to memorize only those activities that have the probability to appear in the examination.”

So, it is clear that, all teachers agree to a point that most of the students’ purpose of learning English is to achieve a good GPA in the examination. When they were asked about the students’ purpose of learning English, they replied:

“It has become a practical tendency of students to achieve a greater GPA in examination.”

“They have to get GPA-5 anyhow.”

“They learn only for getting a good GPA.”

“They are eager to secure good marks in the examination.”

“Their first and foremost priority is to get a good GPA in the examination.”

5. Summary of the findings

5.1. What role does the present SSC English syllabus play in motivating students to achieve communicative competence?

Based on the data analysis, it can be said that the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus plays a very insignificant role in motivating students to achieve communicative competence. Instead of practising the four skills in the classroom, most of the students “are still found to memorize selected answers” (Kabir, 2015: 23). Another finding of my study is that under the present SSC English syllabus, students are actually motivated not to achieve communicative competence, but to get good GPA in the examination.

5.1.1. How much does the present SSC English syllabus motivate students to gain communicative skills in English?

The collected data suggest that all the activities prescribed in SSC English syllabus are not appropriate for motivating students to gain communicative skills. But there are some activities that will be useful for the students, if they really practise those activities in a proper way without memorizing some selected answers from guide-books, as stated by some teachers. Moreover, it is also found that in this syllabus there is no prescribed activities for improving students’ listening and speaking skills, although twenty marks have been allotted to listening and speaking part of this syllabus. As students are mostly eager to do those activities that are prescribed in their syllabus and appear in the examination, they do not show any interest to practise any communicative activities. Kabir (2015) also points out that students only“

appreciate those activities which are important for examination” (Kabir, 2015: 19).

So, the overall finding is that students’ motivation to achieve communicative competence is not fully depended on the activities prescribed in their SSC English syllabus, rather a favourable classroom atmosphere, fruitful interaction between students and teachers, their awareness of the main objectives of the present SSC English syllabus, consciousness on the part of the parents along with an appropriate English syllabus can together make students motivated to achieve communicative competence.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following steps have been recommended:

- a. The writing activities should not depend on selected topics rather they should be open so that students cannot memorize the prescribed topics in their syllabus.
- b. The present SSC English syllabus should prescribe some activities that will compel teachers to create an appropriate and interesting environment, and require students to practise all four skills equally in a communicative setting.
- c. Teachers should make the activities interesting by making them write or say something about new topics in every class. Students should participate in activities like debate, role-play using dialogues prepared by themselves, and speaking freely on the spot etc.
- d. Students’ attitude towards English should be changed. They should not take English merely as a subject, rather they should think that English is a language which should be acquired so that they can be global citizen.
- e. The authority of the institution should provide favourable classroom environment, and appropriate equipment for the students to practise the four skills.

5.3. Limitations of the study

A major limitation of this study is that the data were collected only through providing questionnaire to the students and conducting interview with English teachers, but based on the nature of this study, it is assumed that classroom observation, interview of parents and syllabus designers could also be useful. The findings of this study would have been much more appreciable, if the study was carried out on many schools of different areas.

6. Conclusion

As described in this study, the present CLT-based SSC English syllabus is effective in motivating students to achieve communicative competence only to a certain extent. Though some activities prescribed in present SSC English syllabus are useful for improving students' writing skill and grammatical competence, students are not motivated and enthusiastic enough to practise these activities in a proper way. Their purpose of learning English is not to achieve communicative competence, but to secure a good GPA in the examination. For all of these reasons, they are far away from achieving communicative competence in spite of following a CLT-based syllabus.

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