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Challenges of Implementing Higher Order Thinking Tasks in Bangladeshi Secondary English Classrooms

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Abstract

To make our students think critically, the practice must begin from their schooling years across all subjects of study, and it can be nurtured by implementing Higher Order Thinking (HOT) tasks in classrooms. This exploratory study reports on the challenges that some selected English teachers of secondary level of mainstream schools in Bangladesh faced problems while implementing higher order thinking tasks in the classrooms. In the first phase of the study, total 13 teachers were invited to be a part of a teachers' training that guided them about how to use the techniques on English for Today book in English classrooms. In the second phase of the study, the teachers implemented the techniques in real-life classrooms and in the last stage, the participants were interviewed by the researchers. It was found that some of the students did not participate well in the group thinking tasks and looked for ways to fit in rote learning information from the text. The number of students and class size were some other hinderances in executing the HOT tasks completely. The findings opened on avenues for incorporating critical thinking tasks in Bangladeshi English classrooms that are expected to contribute in preparing future citizens who are able to think critically.

Keywords: Critical Thinking Skills, Secondary English Classrooms, Higher Order Thinking Tasks.

Introduction

One of the common skills that all employers look for in 21st century employees is the ability to think critically (Kumar & James, 2015). The necessity of infusing critical thinking skills at every level of education makes it imperative for teachers to design curriculum across disciplines in such a way that allows graduates to understand a particular subject in the context of real-life experience and motivates them to think deeply (Alismail & McGuire, 2015). However, often teachers find the teaching of critical thinking skills challenging because today's students are highly dependent on

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modern technologies such as the internet (Oliver & Utermohlen, 1995), that fills them in with an overflow of information. Often, most of these students receive "pre-chewed chunks of ideas and opinions", and do not even try to think critically about it. Here, teachers can play a transformational role by "promoting cognitive challenge, collaborative learning and metacognitive discussions" in the lesson plans (Klímova, 2009, p. 101). In other words, rather than concentrating on the learning outcomes on mere pen and paper, they should bring change in the teaching method that encourages thinking as opposed to learning as the sole goal of studying from the very beginning of schooling years to the tertiary level (Thompson, 2011).

Like any other field of study, the teachers of English language are challenged with the task of implementing critical thinking techniques in the language classrooms. Bangladeshi education system is predominantly dependent on students' skill of memorisation. Zahra (2012), in a study on Bangladeshi twelve (12) grade students of both urban and semi-urban higher secondary institutions, has found that majority of the students relied on teachers' feedback and textbooks for gaining knowledge, while they neither considered class discussions nor independent brainstorming as an important medium of learning. The impact of such practices in schools make the students concentrate only on the functional aspects of language learning at the tertiary level language courses where they focus "not on the critical understanding of the language as a medium of thought operations, but on reproduction" (p. 41). These students accept what the teacher has to offer without raising any question and avoid discussions (Mannan, 2016). Rupa (2013) suggests that Bangladeshi children are not encouraged to complete problem-solving tasks at home or at schools, which results in a lack of critical thinking ability in class. A survey among 88 (eighty eight) faculty members who headed Higher Education Quality Enhancement Projects (HEQEP) under the University Grant Commission (UGC), Bangladesh, revealed that the respondents felt that there is a dire need of improving curriculum and assessment system that fosters critical thinking skills among tertiary level students (Mazumder, Karim & Bhuiyan, 2012). Islam (2017) agrees with the findings and emphasises the fact that the absence of critical thinking skills in Bangladeshi classrooms and evaluation system affects students' academic writing, reading, listening and speaking as well. In this regard, a World Bank report on a project that aims at ensuring education for all Bangladeshi children highlighted that the present teaching and testing approaches in Bangladeshi schools depend on rote learning that rewards students with poor reading, writing, and critical thinking skills (World Bank, 2016). Such examples of Bangladeshi education system do remind us about the fact that memorising passages and sentences in English often hinder learners' critical thinking skills in English classrooms.

Bangladesh introduced Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) based curricula for teaching English at the secondary and higher secondary level in 1997 (Sazzadue, 2004; Das et. al. 2014). However, even after two decades of adopting Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) based curriculum, most of the school graduates are not able to use English competently (Rahman, 2015; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). Consequently, these students cannot perform well at the tertiary level of education in terms of reading or writing texts critically.

Such circumstances raise the question whether our current CLT-based English textbooks are sufficient for making global citizens who are able to think critically and communicate well in English. Most of the group or pair works given after the text excerpts in these books are not implemented by teachers which are designed to help students to develop communication skills,

stated by Marufa, a student of secondary level (Marufa, personal communication) which they often do not complete because of limited class time. On top of that, thinking about an issue critically is never emphasised in these classes at all because teachers are not aware of the importance of teaching critical thinking skills across disciplines. Also, they face some challenges when they try to implement some of the critical thinking tasks.

The study thus reports on the challenges some of the Bangladesh English teachers faced while implementing Higher Order Thinking (HOT) tasks in the secondary English classrooms. The teachers were given training on how to implement the HOT tasks through a two-day workshop series on implementation of higher order thinking skills in English classrooms. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1) What problems did the teachers face while implementing higher order thinking tasks in the English classrooms?
2) What possible solutions did the teachers suggest for implementing the higher order thinking tasks in English classrooms?

Methodology

Research Approach

In this research the qualitative study adopted multiple case study approach to answer its research questions. As such a research design is adopted when the context of the research differs for different people (Baxter & Jack, 2008), the researchers found it suitable for the current study where each of the teacher was considered as a single case. Each participant or case's opinion and experience of using higher order thinking skills in their English classrooms differed and those were added to the data of the study. In addition, Yin (2003) emphasises that a case study aims to answer the questions of "How" and "Why" of a study and they understand the context where the phenomenon is taking place. So, each teacher's experience of using the higher order thinking tasks in this study depended on their respective contexts which was explored in this study.

Selecting the Participants

The researchers selected 13 secondary English language teachers teaching in schools located in the capital Dhaka through purposive sampling technique. This technique helped the researchers to obtain information-rich data from the participants (Patton, 2014). The criteria of choosing the participants were:

1) They have to be English language teachers of mainstream secondary schools in Bangladesh,
2) They have to be familiar with the *English For Today* book designed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) for secondary classrooms
3) They have to complete the workshop series under this study and participate in the post-workshop interviews.

All the names of the participants and schools are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity of participants. The profiles of participants are given below.

Table 1

Profiles of the Participants

Serial No.	Name, designation of Participants	Schools' name	Age
1.	Md. Sazzadur Rahman Senior Teacher, English	VCN School and College	50-55
2	Md. Zabir Ullah Assistant Headmaster	BWU High School	50-55
3.	H.M. Karim Khan Assistant Teacher, English	RUB High School	45-55
4.	Rajan Paul Chowdhury Assistant Teacher	GM Higher Secondary School	50-55
5.	Md. Rabbi Islam Senior Teacher, English	WE High School	45-55
6.	Md. Shamim Islam Assistant Headmaster	SAK High School	50-55
7.	Md. Ramiz Ali Lecturer, English	QRT School and College	40-45
8.	Alauddin Sikder Assistant Teacher, English	MAK High School	28-35
9.	Rukaiya Begum English Teacher	SAP School and College	40-45
10.	Md. Arib Islam English Teacher	SAP School and College	30-35
11.	Ali Fakir English Teacher	SAP School and College	28-35
12.	Rubana Hasan English Teacher	SAP School and College	28-30
13.	Faisal Mahbub English Teacher	SAP School and College	28-30

Note: Based on Primary Data

Workshop Series on Implementing HOT Tasks

The selected teachers were invited formally through an invitation letter to join a two-day workshop series on using higher order thinking tasks in secondary English classrooms, held at the Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University. Ahmed and Mohd Asraf (2018) have used workshops as a qualitative research approach in educational research and this study also followed that. Within the two-day workshop, the teachers were trained on how to combine Higher Order Thinking (HOT) questions (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2001), with critical thinking group tasks such as Plus-Minus-Interesting (PMI) model (Bono, 2010), and Fishbowl (Bean, 2011). The group tasks were further extended to individual thinking tasks as Mindmapping (Bean, 2011) and One-Minute Paper (Bean, 2011) (please see workshop session details in Appendix A). The teacher participants practised these techniques with the peer workshop participants and were asked to implement in their real-life English classrooms.

The researchers scheduled observation sessions with the participants to find out how the students responded to the HOT tasks. In qualitative research, observation is used often as a reliable technique for collecting data. The observer's degree of involvement can be placed on a scale of low to high on the basis of five types of participation such as "complete", "active", "moderate", "passive" and "nonparticipant" (Spradley, 1979, p. 58). Here, the researchers were participant observers in case of teachers' workshop series and non-participant observers when then went to observe real-life classrooms. Both the workshop series and class observations were video recorded with the consent of participants.

In the final stage of the study, the teachers were invited for attending interview sessions to share their experience of using the techniques. They brought in a self-reflection form that they had completed after teaching the classes, students' individual task sheets with them as specimen of data. The semi-structured interview questions were made with Castillo-Montoya's (2016) Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) framework.

Data Analysis Framework

For analysing the data of this study, a trained research assistant transcribed the interviews' audio recording verbatim. The transcriptions were then coded and categorised for qualitative thematic analysis. According to Stake (1995), there are four forms of data analysis and interpretation methods for case studies. The first form is categorical aggregation or collecting nuances or instances from the data to look for relevant meanings. The second form of analysis is the direct interpretation which is a process where the researcher looks at a single instance and makes meaning out of that. In the third form, the researcher looks for patterns of themes that emerged while analysing the data. The last form of analysis refers to generalising the pattern of themes for similar cases which is called naturalistic generalisation (Stake, 1995). In this regard, Creswell (2007) prefers that a researcher begins with a detailed description of the case and its locale. Creswell (2007) suggests that various sources of data should be analysed to see how the case fits into the specific setting. As the study follows the characteristics of a multiple case study approach, it has adopted a combination of Creswell (2007) and Stake's (1995) data analysis framework.

Themes generated from the coded and cartegorised data were sent to two experts of the field for inter-rater reliability. The percentage of agreement between the two raters was 85 which establishes the reliability of the data. Moreover, the transcriptions of the interviewers were sent to the participants by email for member checking. The participants confirmed that they had shared the same information in the interview sessions and this is how the trustworthiness of data was established.

Findings and Discussion

Challenges in Implementing HOT Tasks in English Classrooms

Eight teachers among the 13 teacher participants could implement the HOT tasks in their classrooms. The second research question of the study aimed at finding out the challenges the teachers faced while implementing the HOT tasks in English classrooms. When the teachers were asked about it in the interviews, the most prominent theme that emerged was the management of space and time for group task in the classroom. The number of students was too many which

made the classroom noisy, stated Rabbi regarding another problem that the teachers faced. This was the same reason why teachers in Rasul's (2016) study could not execute interactive tasks in English classrooms.

Ali, Sazzad and Rukaiya mentioned that the students had to be instructed constantly to be familiar with the new tasks. Sazzad said in the interview, the students were a bit confused about the new task and took time to participate. But as I helped them with explanation and monitored from time to time, they began to do the task. So, one of the challenges for the teachers was that the students required detailed instructions to complete the new tasks.

Rabbi, Rajan, Ali and Faisal also pointed out that some of the introvert students did not like to participate in the group tasks. Some of the students preferred to do the task individually which was his/ her personal learning style (Brown, 2000). Here, the teachers had to encourage them to complete the task. According to a study conducted by Alrabah, Wu and Alotaibi (2018), Kuwait college students have dominance of global, extroverted, hands on and visual learning styles. To encourage these learning styles in the class, the authors suggested to give clear instructions to the students for every step of a group task. In this regard, Billah (2015) refers to the fact that majority of Bangladesh's mainstream schools' students are very passive to participate in class tasks. In such cases, teachers must be creative to engage students in a variet interactive task (Rasul, 2016). So it can be observed that students' learning styles have affected the way they responded to the HOT tasks employed by the teachers and it can be adjusted through teachers' discription and more practice of such tasks in classrooms.

Another reason for students' preference to complete HOT tasks individually could be that they were not good in communicating and collaborating with others which is required for carrying out any group learning (Brown, 2000). The teachers of the current study also mentioned that handling mixed ability group was difficult. In a mixed group of students, good students complete the tasks quickly while weaker students struggle.

The teacher participants emphasised that the students were more comfortable with the idea of rote learning and that is why they kept going back to prescribed information in the English For Today book while completing the HOT tasks. Here, Zahra's (2012) study on mainstream college classrooms is worth mentioning where she found that majority of the students do not think by themselves and depend on the textbooks and teachers as the sources of information. Rasul (2016) comments on this issue that the students in Bangladesh's mainstream English classrooms are forced to take notes from teachers' lectures and "gulp down" (p.25). Rote learning emerges as one of the prominent challenges in implementing HOT tasks in English classrooms.

Solutions to the Problems

The participants of the study proposed a few solutions to the problems of introducing HOT task in English classrooms of secondary schools in Bangladesh. First of all, they opined that when the students are introduced to the HOT tasks for the first time, the teachers may instruct them more than once to clarify any aspect that they do not understand. The teachers believed that they should also motivate students to participate in the tasks.

Shamim, a participant of the study mentioned that he had asked the student of first bench to flip to sit face to face with the students of the next bench. In this way, he made groups of six students while setting them the group task. Such an innovative way of changing the seating arrangement solves the issue of space in implementing group tasks. In this regard, Ali Fakir mentioned that if the school has the facility to use multimedia, that can be used to show a video on HOT tasks and what they have to do in the class. All of the participants agreed that more practice of such tasks can encourage students to think critically and change the habit of rote learning. In this case, if the students are not able to express their generated ideas well during the tasks, teachers may work as a facilitator as well.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

The study findings may guide the policy makers of Bangladesh in taking the decision of implementing HOT tasks in English classrooms at the mainstream schools. The students of Bangladeshi mainstream schools tend to memorise the information of textbooks and cannot use English communicatively and creatively in day to day life (Rahman, 2015; Rahman & Pandian, 2018, Rasul, 2016). The HOT tasks will help them to change the habit of rote learning and generate new ideas on any topic on their own. This practice will help introvert students to interact with peers in group work and present their own opinions to others. In such a way, we will be able to have critical thinking citizens who are able to compete in the international arena.

Another participant, Ali said, through this method they will not only learn about various issues, they will be practicing, and so their answers will be more creative, more informative and more engaged. This comment highlights the fact that all the students who had participated in the HOT tasks were happy to see a change from the traditional lecture mode of teaching English. The aspect of the students reverting to rote learning can be tackled if these techniques are used all the year round.

All the participants remarked that they would like to implement the techniques in their classrooms in future. They are looking forward to more teacher trainings like this from the policy makers. Also, they suggested that the teachers who have already had the training could share their knowledge with colleagues and disseminate their gained knowledge.

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