

Challenges against the successes of mLearning in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Mobile learning is a recent phenomenon in the Bangladeshi education system. The ongoing English in Action project has been at the forefront of promoting the use of mobile technologies for English language training in Bangladesh, and has been one of the primary examples to demonstrate the potential of mobile devices in the classroom, and teacher professional support. This paper will discuss the challenges that have arisen in the promotion of mobile learning in Bangladesh, as well as the successes as highlighted by the English in Action project. Moreover, it will offer a brief glimpse into the work of the project and its mechanism for spreading mobile learning in typical Bangladeshi context.

Author Keywords

Bangladesh, BBC Janala, EIA, English language training, mobile learning, trainers in pocket

INTRODUCTION

In Bangladeshi educational culture, mobile learning has only recently been promoted. As it is growing very slowly, people know little about the formal use of it for the purpose of education or any other form of development. It is seen from the platform of English In Action (an education project of DFID) that as a new device of education, it has been able to draw people's attention and earn their appreciation as well. When mobile learning has been applied to the main stream education, it is experienced that it has added color to the academic life of the rural teachers and students. It was beyond their imagination that their everyday cell phone could be used as a tool for learning the English language and developing their professional capacity. Although it has received a warm welcome, it is facing many challenges too for a variety of reasons. This paper will discuss the challenges along with the successes, and offer a brief glimpse into the work of the English in Action project.

In Bangladesh, English In Action, a nine year education project, - funded by UK-AID, aims to develop 25 million people's English language competence to ensure their better access to the world economy. It has two components: one is BBC Janala that is designed to introduce communicative English language skills to adults using low-tech mobile phones, daily newspaper, television and internet whereas the focus of the other component of the program is to develop mainly rural and some urban teachers professional capacity promoting mobile technology as a tool to provide digital materials to ensure better English teaching- learning inside the classrooms. This paper will mainly focus on teachers' professional development component.

EIA is funded by the UK Government and is working closely with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) and the Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of Bangladesh. BMB Mott MacDonald is on the management side taking BBC Media Action, The Open University (OU), UK as technical partners and two national NGOs – Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme (UCEP) and Friends in Village Development Bangladesh (FIVDB) along with them to work together to implement the Programme and achieve its goal collectively.

Teachers training support model:

A wide and varied EIA team works to reach school teachers of both primary and secondary with their pedagogic support. The English teaching and teacher training specialists and experts from The Open University (OU), UK helps develop the capacity of TTS unit. Core Trainers (CTs), a group of specialist trainers an important element of TTS Unit, act as mentors and facilitators to the Teacher Facilitators (TFs) and sometimes to teachers. Teacher facilitators (TFs), - are specially selected and trained Government teachers, who act as facilitators and mentors to the teachers in schools in their locality. All teacher training and support activities in each Upazilla are implemented through and with support from existing Government structures with the valuable help from officials such as Upazilla Education/Secondary Officers and others. There are monitoring cells from EIA side for the evaluation of the training. The CTs visit classes to observe the training impact on the regular teaching-learning.

Implementation process

Besides English In Action's professional printing materials for the teachers, there is the 'trainer in the pocket' a mobile low cost phone that contains an SD card holding a range of teachers' professional video, audio, materials which can be accessed and used anywhere any time. The video and audio materials in the SD card inserted into Nokia C1-01 are designed as self-access Continuing Professional Development (CPD)materials for the teachers. All selected teachers get

one mobile phone uploaded with materials which have been developed for both primary and secondary teachers by the Open University, UK. Different techniques are embedded in the videos of authentic classroom teaching of real rural teachers as ideal practices to help teachers learn how to integrate 4 skills: listening speaking, reading and writing.

Moreover, there are audio materials based on the English textbook series, *English for Today* (National Curriculum and Textbook Board, 2013) of the national curriculum for the purpose of classroom use. Teachers are encouraged to play those materials which contain recorded English rhymes, poems, songs, and the texts using the rechargeable audio speakers to help students with their listening and speaking skills in English.

Successes of mobile learning in Bangladesh

The project has already documented a significant improvement among the teachers and students regarding teaching learning in English in both primary and secondary schools. Successful findings emerge from classroom- based research, monitoring and evaluation (RME) across urban, rural, suburb and remote rural areas. The robust RME demonstrates the success and potential of using video and audio resources on mobile devices – particularly mobile phones – with lightweight portable rechargeable speakers to provide TPD (Teacher professional Development).

At the end of the pilot phase, EIA conducted two large-scale quantitative studies to indicate the extent of change observed in the classroom practices of teachers participating in EIA after 1 year. One lesson from 350 Primary teachers and 141 of the Secondary teachers in the project were observed. The results were compared to those observed in a 2009 baseline study, *An observation study of English lessons in primary and secondary schools in Bangladesh* (English in Action, 2009) prior to the project's intervention.

In English in Action classrooms the teachers' playing of mobile uploaded audio helps them make the classrooms interactive. The study above focused upon the use of English by teachers and pupils, the extent of teacher and pupil talk time, the nature of the teachers' talk, as well as the nature of the classroom activities that pupils took part in. The data from Primary classroom observations show that the overall percentage of teacher talk time took up about a third (34%) of the lesson, while the overall percentage of student talk time was only slightly less (27%). The data from Secondary classroom observations show that the overall percentage of teacher talk time took up a third (33%) of the lesson, while the overall percentage of student talk time was 23%. Here too the findings suggest a significant emphasis on communication and interaction in the classroom.

This study indicates significant changes in classroom practices and the amount of English language compared with that observed in the Baseline 3 study conducted in 2009. At that time teachers were observed to be primarily reading from the textbook, rarely involving students in activities, and in two thirds of the lessons, speaking in English less than in Bangla. In only a small proportion of lessons did the students speak in English during a lesson or have opportunities to participate actively in discussion or to answer questions.

The audio supports to the improvement in teachers-students listening and speaking skills based on their text book activities. When the primary teachers were speaking, they used English the majority of the time (71%). Earlier most of the time teachers used to speak in Bangla for instruction to conduct English class. When Primary pupils were speaking, they also used English most of the time (88%).

- The kids of primary enjoy a lot the greeting songs and rhymes when they sing together with the audio.
- The concept 'trainer in the pocket' of mobile device has proven a great resource for the teachers to grow professionally.
- Mobile learning has started having a great impact on developing a communicative approach of language learning. The second study indicated that both primary and secondary pupils reported that teachers used English most of the time in lessons and that they often participated in English CLT practices (activities such as group and pair work, dialogue, and listening activities with mobile audio).
- The intervention of technology aided teaching learning has ensured more presence of the students in the classroom.
- It helps social inclusion through fun and enjoyment.
- The educated mass from different corners of the country is having access to the English language learning program through dialing phone via BBC Janala. The audio lessons of BBC Janala have been dialed 9, 507,275 times since its launch in 2009. 4.8 million and 18.1 million people have watched the English language learning magazine show, BBC Buzz and the game show 'Mojae Mojae Shekha' on BTV (Bangladesh Television) (English in Action, 2013)

CHALLENGES OF MOBILE LEARNING

The challenges which are discussed below are not exactly based on the collected data of research team rather more on discussion or sharing in the training about the problems or issues the teachers are having currently in using technology aided materials and the impression we have in general.

Lack of digital know-how

The average rural Bangladeshi lacks technological knowledge. In 2013 the total number of internet users' were 33million out of 154.7 million people (Wikipedia, 2013). As they are not familiar with the contemporary use of mobile phone, they are not likely to adapt easily to any new technological device like cell phones for language learning purpose. They take mobile learning very lightly and still many of them give more preference to the process of learning through memorizing rules and answers to the traditional questions.

Infrastructural support

The government has not yet been able to provide uniform infrastructural support to the rural areas. Many remote places like hill areas are still without a regular electricity supply. At this the schools and teachers need to send the rechargeable audio speakers to the center of the town or any place where the electricity is available to get them charged. This may discourage teachers from using mobile materials in those key areas where the promotion of inclusive education is essential. Moreover, using mobile technology depends a great deal on network coverage for mobile phones and internet connection in order to communicate with others. The nation is yet to accommodate itself under such system.

Variation in testing/evaluation system

In the curriculum of Bangladesh, a CLT approach has been introduced to its textbooks in English. The main stream education of Bangladesh is designed to evaluate the students through summative assessments every three months and the final exam at the year end. In the curriculum and syllabus there was no scope of formative assessment at the primary and secondary level till 2013. As teachers are overburdened with the course content to be finished within a year time, covering the syllabus through the traditional approach is the teachers- students' main target rather than introducing a creative learning process. Moreover, only reading and writing skills are assessed so students take preparation only on those two skill areas instead of practicing English in a real life context.

Low capacity of the teachers

In the rural areas of Bangladesh many teachers' English competence level is too low to run English classes based on innovation and creativity. They prefer traditional classes to a modern communicative approach. Moreover, students are blamed by teachers for being weak as teachers want to hide their own weaknesses. Most often teachers complain that their students' level of English language skills is very low so it is better for them to memorize things. That is also another hindrance towards new system of learning.

Disorder of digital materials

As mobile enhanced learning is dependent on digital mechanism, if the machines are out of order, the everyday teaching-learning gets stuck and becomes time consuming. In that case, most often the digital materials are sent back to the center for repairing since the remote places of Bangladesh are not very advanced in technology support. By then teachers-students technology enhanced teaching-learning practice initiated by mobile gets hampered.

Parents' anxiety

Bangladeshi parents believe that children's need to be educated through a serious rigorous process of teaching. There is no place for fun activities in their children's education. Parents are not comfortable with any education methodology that does not directly address the completion of the syllabus for the exam.

Sustainability

The concept of mobile learning is new to a developing country like Bangladesh and it needs strong support from all stakeholders like the government, parents, education specialists, teachers for its contribution and sustainability within the main stream education. The want of patronization can hinder the progress of mobile learning to reach the target.

Teachers not comfortable with the distant learning concept

Since the beginning of education in the Indian sub-continent, its people are habituated to face to face education support. The culture of distant' learning without a teacher is still not very popular. That is why mobile learning sees challenges when the learners are not the friendly readers of distant digital and print materials. The Bangladeshi rural teachers have been observed to some extent as being less interested in using self-study professional development materials.

Education and poverty

Poverty and an uneducated population are a major concern to be overcome by the government. It sounds strange when the issue comes to spread the light of mobile learning across a country where many people are still illiterate (40.18%) (International Publications, 2013) and live under the poverty line (31.50%) (Barrientos & Soria, 2013). They might find digital learning ideologically extravagant and far away thing from their everyday life and its crises. Moreover, teachers sometime show negligence and disinterest because they are ill-paid for their work. Instead of giving extra time for creative teaching-learning, they are more interested in offering private tuition to their students for money.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: POSSIBLE WAYS TO COMBAT THE CHALLENGES

The Government of Bangladesh is committed to building a country whose citizens using technology are able to live prosperous and happy lives by the year 2021 which marks the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence. Appreciating the initiatives taken by the government, EIA has sought to leverage technology currently available to turn the dream into a reality. Moreover, EIA's model has the target to be sustainable and is currently forging partnerships with national and local partners, including teacher training institutes, to embed EIA materials and student-centered pedagogy into these institutionalized programs. The government has also started to accommodate its teaching-learning approach with the modern trends of education. Now onwards the listening and speaking skills will be assessed in the primary and junior level as formative assessment. Therefore, it might be possible for Bangladesh to combat the challenges of technology enhanced teaching-learning and succeed with the help of low cost, scalable and sustainable innovative initiatives such as EIA.

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