

## Interrogating the English of the English Curriculum in Postcolonial Bangladesh

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### Abstract

Against the colonial origin and its initial global spread and the neo-colonial hegemony of English, this article calls for interrogating the English of the English curriculum in postcolonial societies, taking Bangladesh as a case study. It is argued that while the English language has been subjected to recurrent theorising in the neighbouring fields of Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics, the changing understandings of English seem to have had limited influence on English studies in Bangladesh. To illustrate the point, the author takes an autoethnographic approach and provides an account of his experience of studying English at the University of Dhaka. He also seeks to explain why academics in the fields of English Literature and Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT) have had limited cross-disciplinary interaction in the greater interest of both fields. The author concludes that the much-desired goal of decolonising policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and knowledge-making may not be achieved without questioning the English language. It is suggested that the way forward may be to consider English as a Southern language which will allow for its localisation and its deployment along the lines of Southern epistemologies and epistemic pluralism.

### Keywords

Interrogating English, English in Bangladesh, decolonising education, postcolonial theory, world Englishes, English as a Southern language

### Introduction

... the development of English, the development of ELT, the development of English literature could not have happened without the

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colonial encounter. (ELT and colonialism, Pennycook 17)

This is how Alastair Pennycook, a leading Australian applied linguist, described the role of colonialism in the development of English (currently a global language) and the fields of English Literature and English Language Teaching (ELT). The statement can be reinterpreted to suggest that had there been no British colonial rule, we might not have had English, English Literature, and ELT in their current forms and glory beyond the borders of England. English is also widely acknowledged as a neo-colonial tool in the contemporary world (Hultgren; Phillipson “Counterpoint”) and its hegemony is unlikely to end in the near future (Ammon; Bruthiaux). What kind of “writing back” to the colonial origin and development of English and the two fields would be deemed appropriate in a postcolonial era? How should English be viewed at a time when there are growing calls for decolonising curriculum and pedagogy in former colonies as well as colonial centres (Ranasinha; Reyes et al.)? What kind of English do we need to neutralise its hegemony and redress the epistemic harm already committed (Connell), and bring epistemic justice and pluralism (e.g., Heugh, Stroud, Taylor-Leech and De Costa)?

This article invites questioning and deconstructing the English of the English Literature as widely studied in secondary and tertiary curriculum in postcolonial societies. I present Bangladesh as a case study and my personal reflection of the study of English at the University of Dhaka provides the substance of my argument. Thus, the article has an autoethnographic (Ellis, Adams and Bochner; Sparkes) character in which the self is connected to the context (Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang) in order to develop an understanding of English from sociolinguistic, educational, political, and ethical perspectives. I suggest that although we were dealing with English at every step of our study, the language remained unquestioned in our curriculum, pedagogy, and academic socialisation. I suspect that, in Bangladesh, not much has changed in this respect since our student life, even as English studies has widened with the establishment of dozens of private universities, and almost all of them offering English as part of their undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. This is not to deny the critical works by colleagues (Rafi and Morgan 2021; Sultana 2019), who are arguing for “translanguaging” (Garcia and Li 2014) in critiquing so-called standard languages, including English, and pursuing the potential of linguistic border-crossing in higher education. While privatisation and commodification of education has weeded out many arts and humanities subjects from the private university curriculum (Alam; Kabir and Chowdhury) because of their limited applicability in the employment market, English has been spared the disciplinary weed-cleaning.

My autoethnographic exploration draws on the theoretical insights provided by postcolonial theory, world Englishes (WE), and Southern

epistemologies, as they relate to the key issues discussed in this paper. Before outlining these theoretical issues and recounting my experience of the study of English, I would outline the context of introducing English during colonial rule in the next section.

### **The introduction of English in British India**

The official introduction of English in colonial India has received a lot of scholarly attention (Alam; Joshi; Rajan; Viswanathan). The language itself has also been subjected to various interpretations (e.g., Chandra; Nandi; Sangari). Once the British East India Company embraced the responsibility of educating the natives through the Charter Act of 1813, the question encountered was related to the content and the medium of education. The ongoing Anglicist-Orientalist debate was at the fore in which the Anglicists argued for English and Western education while the Orientalists were against such education because they believed that the British should not interfere in the cultural and moral life of the natives. Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minute on education is believed to have ended the debate with the victory of the Anglicist camp, as he was able to make a winning case against Oriental knowledge in favour of Western learning. The Minute was a culminating act, which resolved many uncertainties about what the British could achieve by the educational provision. Although the English education in Britain served as a helpful reference, differences between the two contexts could not be ignored. In Britain, English studies was different for different social classes, as it was set to pursue different goals for the social groups. While the English of the lower class was not deemed suitable for the Indians, the upper-class model was viewed as risky for the colonial project (Viswanathan). Modelled on the study of Latin, the upper-class English studies did not have a clear focus on literature. The colonial rulers wanted to keep their secularist rule detached from the question of religion, a point on which they disagreed with the Christian missionaries, but they could not introduce the English of the British system which was informed by classical humanism and pursued the values of secularism, freedom, and high culture (Viswanathan). The dilemma was resolved, as Viswanathan explains, by rebranding English and representing it as a cultural ideal underpinned by Christian values so it could serve as a tool for socio-political control. This social experimentation with English Literature as a field of study in colonial India later contributed to its institutionalisation in Britain. English Literature was found as an effective hegemonic tool which would not only distract the natives from the demand for freedom but also ensure their continued enslavement. The colonial authorities relied on their reading of the social and psychological mind of the natives who, as it was diagnosed, had a great desire for learning those knowledges and skills that gave the British supremacy and ensured their control of one quarter of the globe. English Literature was presented as key

to British greatness and its impact was considered more decisive than the natives' encounter with any British person. As Viswanathan noted:

The English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state: '[The Indians] daily converse with the best and wisest Englishmen through the medium of their works, and form ideas, perhaps higher ideas of our nation than if their intercourse with it were of a more personal kind'.... (380)

This cultural power of English served as a medium for "indirect rule" (Polzenhagen, Finzel, and Wolf), as its deployment was believed to cement colonial subjugation. As we also know from the oft-quoted extract from Macaulay's *Minute*, based on the power of English Literature and its hegemonic affordances, it would create an Indian elite who would give up their own identity and be more like the British despite their inescapable physical appearance. These English-educated "Brown Sahibs" were expected to be different from their own country people due to the loss of their social and cultural moorings in their encounter with British values embodied in English Literature. This legacy of English education from the colonial rule called for a response in the postcolonial era.

### **English and postcolonial theory, world Englishes and Southern theory**

The colonial origin of English together with its socio-political experiment can be examined from multiple perspectives. Postcolonial theory is the commonly applied theoretical lens to the study of colonial experiences in different fields of inquiry (Mishra). In relation to English and English Literature, postcolonial studies has generally referred to "writing back" to the empire (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin), often using the linguistic medium that was used for colonial control and subjugation (Husain; Quayum and Hasan). While there had been calls for dispensing with the colonial tool, the transplantation of English had gone deep into the social realm and has been difficult to uproot. The encounter with English and the empire was so pervasive that postcolonial life could not be lived without using English as a tool for social/socio-cultural and communicative expression. Politically, the exogenous tool was more acceptable to various linguistic groups due to its purported neutrality, as in the case of India. English also became an essential lingua franca for use across intra-national linguistic differences within Pakistan, for example. Consequently, English became more dominant, and it spread more widely in the postcolonial era than during colonial rule. In particular, the language has maintained its hegemonic control in education, as it is demanded by different social groups due to associated power and prestige (Hamid and Jahan, "Language, identity and social divides").

British English as a model for teaching, learning, and communication has been widely sought in the postcolonial era. The bureaucracy remains the notorious site for maintaining colonial norms of English. However, English has

been transformed in the realm of literature and creative work. The key contribution of postcolonial theory lies in problematising English and driving home the realisation that writing in English by postcolonial authors is not a case of mimicry, as their English is markedly different from the brand introduced through colonial rule. The linguistic difference has been claimed by a number of authors in South Asia and Africa, including Raja Rao (1908-2006), Ahmed Ali (1910-94), Kamala Das (1934-2009), and Chinua Achebe (1930-2013). English has also been claimed to be the authors' own language and no longer the language of the British or the American only.

While postcolonial theory has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the socio-politics of English (see Desai), its Anglophone basis has come under criticisms (Huddart). Moreover, postcolonial views of English can be seen as elitist as it is mainly the English-educated from the upper echelons of society who are able to use the language for creative purposes and claim its ownership. Finally, it has been argued that postcolonial theory has reached an impasse looking for extension and renewal beyond literary studies (Huddart; Mishra). For Huddart, dialogue with world Englishes may help achieve this disciplinary reenergising.

The world Englishes (WE) paradigm which is associated with the Kashmiri linguist Braj Kachru (1932-2016) can be read as addressing some of the limitations of postcolonial theory. Kachru sought to theorise English putting forward his key argument that there were many Englishes – both native and non-native – in the world. It is argued that non-native Englishes, particularly those in postcolonial contexts, developed their own norms which should be recognised for linguistic equality and justice. He explained that the phenomenal spread of English in the world led to the indigenisation of the language to meet local needs of communication both within nations and *internationally*. The major focus of world Englishes research has been on identifying features of English that can contribute to the formation of national varieties such as Indian English, Malaysian English, or Nigerian English (Bolton). The WE perspective can complement postcolonial theory by helping to end the social elitism associated with English by recognising English beyond the narrow domain of literary studies. On a global level, WE argues that Englishes in postcolonial societies are separate varieties deserving equal status with native Englishes such as British or American English.

While both postcolonial theory and the WE paradigm (as well as other comparable perspectives such as English as an international language and English as a lingua franca) have provided important lenses for research on English in postcolonial societies, both perspectives may be perceived as inadequate to achieve the decolonisation of curriculum, theory, pedagogy, and epistemology (Kumaravadivelu; Pennycook, “Translingual entanglements”). For this goal, scholars have suggested drawing on Southern theories or epistemologies to challenge Eurocentric views of knowledge and knowledge construction. Southern

perspectives are expected to address the epistemicide that has been committed, recognising Southern ways of knowledge and knowledge-making and ensuring epistemological pluralism (Connell; Heugh et al; Rosa). Southern perspectives have clear implications for languages in general and English in particular. English remains the main medium for epistemic work even in the Global South given the hegemony of English as a global lingua franca in all important fields. However, along the lines of the arguments of postcolonial theory and world Englishes, this has to be a different kind of English which can speak of the reality of life, identity, and epistemic practices in postcolonial societies such as Bangladesh.

The various theoretical perspectives presented in this section suggest that the English language in the study of literature or any other field cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be questioned, appropriated, and recontextualised so it can serve as a suitable medium for teaching, learning, research, and academic discourse in the Global South. It is on these grounds that I recount my personal experience of studying English at the University of Dhaka as a way of interrogating the language and its literature.

### **Personal journey into the study of English Literature**

Having been born into a humble family and raised in a remote location in Bangladesh (Hamid, “An autoethnography”), I had limited understanding of the relative value of different careers and of the connection between university studies and career choices. As the first child in all my generations to have finished school and go to university, I received no guidance from within the family. When I came to the University of Dhaka in the early 1990s for my undergraduate study, I opted for English. Although I had a lot of options, including Law, Economics, International Relations, Sociology, and Public Administration, I wrote English on the preference form that I submitted as part of the admission process. I cannot fully explain what guided my choice, but my fascination for the language developed in a special school for disadvantaged children that I had attended must have played a role. I did not speak English much, but I was not scared of the language. In those days, a mixture of fear and fascination with English was rather common among students, particularly in rural Bangladesh. It is still the case for many children from low socioeconomic status families in rural settings (Hamid, *Sociology of language learning*).

My study of English for the next five years at the University brought mixed experiences for me. Personally, I was struggling with the subject, as I did not bring the right linguistic, social, and cultural capital and habitus to my study. The British society as depicted in the many literary texts was too distant for me to be able to make sense and appreciate. However, my social experience of studying English was different. As a student of English and studying at the best institution for English studies in the country, I felt being “special”. As one of the founding departments when the University was established in 1921, the English

Department had a good reputation all over the country. Being a student of this Department helped me from an instrumental point of view as well. For example, it was relatively easy for me to find work as a tutor in Dhaka to earn my living, as my parents were unable to support me financially. From my interactions with my peers and other people, I also formed the impression that we did not have to worry about future employment, as English graduates could easily land jobs in many sectors (Hamid, “An autoethnography”).

We studied a comprehensive curriculum that included literary texts from almost all stages of the history of English literature including Old and Middle English, the Renaissance, the Neoclassical period, the age of Romanticism, the Victorian period, and the Edwardian and Georgian periods. At the postgraduate level, we studied twentieth-century poetry, drama, and novel, Shakespeare, selections from American literature, Classics in translation and either continental literature or world literature in English including selections from Indian, Caribbean, and African authors. While almost the entire curriculum focused on literary texts, including poetry, drama, essays and novels, a handful of courses focused on language skills development, including reading, writing, and phonetics. The curriculum provided exposure to the best-known authors and their works selected from a long history of the field. Some of the works led us to appreciate the value of literature and its relevance across time and space. We were able to examine the human mind and psyche (e.g., Herman Melville [1819-91], Joseph Conrad [1857-1924], D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), and Graham Greene (1904-91), journey of people towards humanity (e.g., Shakespeare’s *King Lear* [1606] and Dickens’ *Great Expectations* [1861]), tensions between the rules of the heart and the laws of Christianity (e.g., Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* [1850]), values of democracy (e.g., Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* [1954] and Whitman’s *Song of Myself* [1855]), slavery and colonial barbarity (e.g., Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* [1899], Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* [1884], and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* [1958]). The selection of Indian authors, including R. K. Narayan (1906-2001), Nirad Chaudhuri (1897-1999), Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004), Kamala Das, and Anita Desai (1937-), was an opportunity to appreciate the representation of life and society from our part of the world through the medium of English. It was of course a different English, not a replica of what the colonial rulers transplanted in South Asian soil (Desai; Schneider). In studying English poetry by Indian authors in particular, some features of Indian English were occasionally highlighted, although for many of us it was difficult to see differences between Indian English and British or American English. Coming from humble backgrounds in rural Bangladesh, I rarely had the opportunity to hear English spoken by British or American or Indian people. Occasionally, we came across the apt observations made by Raja Rao or Chinua Achebe about the kind of English that they were using in their works, highlighting that the language had to go through the process of acculturation to be a suitable medium for their writing

(see Desai). We also heard about the different perspective held by the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938-) who believed that writing in English was a case of colonisation of the mind (see wa Thiong'o; see also Desai; Mishra). This stance can be read as suggesting that retaining English in the postcolonial era was a case of colonial continuity in a so-called decolonised world.

### **Reflecting on English and my English study**

More than two decades after my graduation from the English Department, I feel a strong urge to reflect on my experience as a student of English. I am keen on inquiring about the language itself which we took almost for granted during our study. An awareness of the unquestioned view of English has been prompted by my research on world Englishes in general and Bangladeshi English in particular (Hamid, "Bangladeshi English;" Hamid and Hasan). It is also part of the argument underpinning my current research that calls for viewing English as a Southern language (Hamid, "English as a Southern language") in a world that has been dominated by Northern English and Northern epistemological views.

Looking back, I find it incredible that we did not question the language itself which served as the medium of our study of literature. If the question of Why English? did not require an answer, the question of Which English? was certainly not just relevant but imperative. Since our study, particularly at the postgraduate level, involved different Englishes including British English, American English, and African/Caribbean/Indian English, was it not natural that we asked which English was our target and norm? The English of the different authors from different times and places served as what might be called the "input variety". This refers to the variety of English that students are exposed to in their reading and listening. How can we describe our own English that we spoke in the class (very little by students, mostly by lecturers), wrote in our assignments, and in our end-of-year final examinations? Did our study of English Literature mean that we were imitating the English of the colonial masters? Were we journeying towards native English as our destination from our various starting points with English in our life and situation? Our postcolonial condition would have demanded a critique of English and its appropriation/localisation as part of the decolonisation process (see Desai).

This unquestioned view of English appears surprising particularly when it is considered that the much talked about language of local and global significance was the subject of continuous characterisation and re-characterisation in the neighbouring fields of Sociolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, and ELT/TESOL. In the latter fields, repeated scholarly attempts were made to describe the language to set relevant teaching and learning goals. While the racial categorisation of English into native and non-native varieties was quite common around the time that sought to maintain the hegemony of English-speaking countries for commercial and ideological interests (Phillipson, *Linguistic*



*imperialism*), the concept of “native speaker” together with the identification of such speakers was questioned by critical scholars (Holliday). The question of the (un)availability of English in the social environment was recognised as an important factor from a pedagogical point of view. This led to characterising English either as a foreign language or a second language, suggesting that English language learners had access to the language in the social environment in the latter context which however was missing from the former. Theorising the language as a sociolinguistic phenomenon in a globalising world was already underway (Coupland). English was generally understood as a global language based on its global spread and reach (Hamid, “The politics of language”). Alongside this characterisation, English also came to be identified as a local language and, not long afterwards, as a glocal language, considering its global-local significance (Pakir). Understanding the sociolinguistic reality of English or its changing faces across times and places attracted significant scholarship which led to the development of various paradigms. While one strand of this work sought to record the variations in English informed by variationist sociolinguistics, another strand not just sought to understand variations but also advocated for linguistic egalitarianism, social justice, and democracy. As Onysko notes, Braj Kachru was the founder of the second strand. Kachru’s perspective on English would have been influenced by postcolonial theory. However, the development of world Englishes also showed the limitations of postcolonialism, as previously pointed out.

The WE paradigm defines the world of Englishes into three concentric circles, namely the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. This differentiated conceptualisation of English in the world aims at understanding different roles and statuses of English and differences in its use by different speech communities, recognising its creativity and innovation in response to local socio-cultural realities. The Inner Circle refers to those national contexts where English is used as a native language; the Outer Circle refers to nations with colonial history where English has attained an institutional status as a second language; and the Expanding Circle refers to nations without history of colonial rule where English has the status of a foreign language. While these Circles of English have received criticisms (for an overview see Hamid and Jahan, “English in education”), they provide the most comprehensive representation of English in the world.

These developments in conceptualising English seemed to have almost no reflection in our curriculum or pedagogy in the English Department. Importantly, the separation of Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan) from the Federation of Pakistan and its emergence as an independent nation in 1971 brought a significant change in the status of English. From its earlier status of English as a second language which also served as a link language between the provinces of Pakistan, English became a foreign language which was no longer

needed for intra-national communication in a predominantly Bangla-speaking polity (see Hamid and Baldauf). Such a significant sociolinguistic shift might not have influenced the pedagogical operation of the Department which seemed to have maintained the continuity of the view of English adopted during its establishment in 1921.

How could the study of English maintain its insularity from the continuous theorising and retheorising of the language in the neighbouring fields? I would put forward several reasons. The first is the divide between the field of English Literature and Applied Linguistics and ELT. The study of English Literature introduced during colonial rule has attained certain prestige which has become part of the social ideology of English in the country and the region. If the study of English during colonial rule symbolised social power and elitism, its study since the official end of colonisation has come to be associated with global mobility, progressive thinking, and secularist views (Jahan and Hamid). Although the questions of language pedagogy were not ignored, the predominant use of the grammar-translation method maintained the dominance of literature and its goals for academic study (Alam). As Applied Linguistics emerged as a new discipline in the post-World War II period, it was not introduced as a field of study even in the early days of independent Bangladesh. It might have been due to the perceived sufficiency of English Literature on the one hand and the limited knowledge of Applied Linguistics in the country on the other. Second, when the tertiary study of Applied Linguistics and ELT was introduced in Bangladesh in the late 1980s, it was considered not only peripheral but also inferior to English Literature which had already established itself as an elite discipline. The prestige of the latter was developed over decades by the appointment of renowned professors of English at the University of Dhaka during British and Pakistan periods. As it is noted in the English Department website:

C. L. Wren, a distinguished scholar who later became Professor of English at Oxford was appointed the first Head of the Department. After 1947 several teachers left the department and for some time there was a crisis. However later eminent teacher like Professor A.G. Stock joined as teaching faculty. (<https://www.du.ac.bd/body/about/ENG>)

Even at the turn of independence in 1971, the English departments at all public universities were filled by distinguished professors of English who were reputed scholars. On the other hand, the academic leadership for the new discipline of Applied Linguistics and ELT could claim little in terms of authority, tradition, or prestige. There were only a handful of professors in Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics affiliated with the University of Dhaka and other public universities. However, this uncertain future of Applied Linguistics came to change with the changing views of languages and language proficiency in a

globalising world. These waves of change were experienced in Bangladesh as well, shaping and reshaping the future of English education in the country.

As the world turned into a global village, English emerged as a global lingua franca for all key domains such as information and communication, knowledge and research, technology and discovery, media and entertainment, and trade and commerce (Crystal). There was a significant increase in global mobility across the world. This mobility was particularly noteworthy in Europe, where nations were brought together under the new entity of European Union creating supra-national identity and citizenship. English proficiency was needed in this changing world for practical communicational purposes, overshadowing the study of English for culture, literature, and aesthetics. This macro, societal change was first responded to in the EU where citizens from different countries crossed the porous national borders for selling their labour in other European nations. Communicative competence emerged as the key goal of English language teaching which was informed by foundational theoretical work by Del Hymes. His theory of communicative competence was at the centre of the pedagogical movement called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which started to spread all over the world from the 1970s onwards (Richards and Rodgers). Education systems across the globe embraced CLT for English teaching and learning to develop communicative competence in their future citizens. CLT emerged as a global pedagogical model, and a large-scale borrowing of the model replaced the age-old grammar-translation method (Hamid and Honan). The borrowing led to introducing a new curriculum based on linguistic and functional content replacing the selection of literary texts, including short stories, poems, and essays. In Bangladesh, the CLT curriculum reform was initiated in the 1990s which was facilitated by ELT development aids from the UK government and other agencies. The English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) jointly funded by the Bangladesh Government and the British Department for International Development (DFID) was the first to bring the reforms in the late 1990s (Hamid, "Globalisation, English;" Hunter). Among many other initiatives, the 'English in Action' (2009-2018) was a landmark project which also aimed to help develop communicative competence among teachers, students, and citizens in or out of school (Hamid and Jahan, "Beneficiary voices").

An awareness of communicative competence being based on real-life language use rather than the appreciation of literature, the pouring of aid money into CLT reforms changed the status of Applied Linguistics and ELT in Bangladesh, as elsewhere. The ratification of the Private University Act, 1992 led to opening private universities, with almost all universities opening English departments in recognition of the growing demand for English in the country. The universities themselves became a huge market for English, as these institutions started operating through the medium of English and needed to introduce English-language support programmes for most of their students who

came from Bangla-medium schooling backgrounds (Hamid and Al Amin). If Applied Linguistics and ELT constituted a marginal component of the English Literature dominated curriculum in public universities, the private universities came to place either equal weight to Literature and Applied Linguistics and ELT or, in some cases, gave more weight to the latter considering the demand for English proficiency and its growing market (Alam).

The status of English teaching materials in Bangladesh has had mixed effects on the attitudes towards English and approaches to English teaching and learning. Purchasing ELT textbooks from Western publishers for primary and secondary level students might have been a wishful thinking from the economic point of view. Economics might have also forced education authorities to produce English textbooks locally. Although localisation of textbooks is a critical first step towards localisation of English (Hamid and Jahan, “English in education”), limited use of English in mainstream education may not have contributed to local ways of English. On the other hand, the tertiary sector has depended almost entirely on external teaching materials in the absence of local production of ELT resources.

These developments have led to both desirable and undesirable consequences for the two fields of English Literature and Applied Linguistics and ELT. Desirably, the English curriculum at the undergraduate level in many universities in the private and public sectors has come to accommodate courses related to English Literature as well as Applied Linguistics and ELT. At the postgraduate level, students in many universities can choose their specialisation in Applied Linguistics or TESOL or English Literature, although the former options have been attracting more students compared to the latter in recent years. Undesirably, the changing status of the two fields has led to professional rivalry between English Literature and Applied Linguistics academics. For the Literature academics, it may be hard to accept the growing popularity of Applied Linguistics and ELT at the expense of English Literature (Alam). Such rivalry may point to limited constructive interaction between the two fields and the lack of willingness to borrow ideas and perspectives from the other field into the study of English Literature.

### **Why does English need interrogation?**

As I have already implied, the interrogation of English is imperative for many reasons. First, the unprecedented global spread of English has led to its localisation and local identity, subjecting it to manifold theorisations motivated by various perspectives. The study of English Literature cannot be continued with an assumed insularity; the field needs to borrow from Applied Linguistics and Sociolinguistics – particularly the perspectives of world Englishes and English as a lingua franca – so students have an appreciation of the politics of English and form their views of the language as one of the most hegemonic tools. English has

become “entangled” in our lives (Pennycook). Rather than taking its putative innocence for granted, the language needs to be understood as part of the “problematic” (Rubdy). Students of English Literature need to question English to have an appreciation of the ongoing decolonisation movement in various fields and of the calls for epistemic plurality and ecology of knowledges. They need to understand that the English language no longer belongs to any particular nation or community; as a common property, it belongs to the world. However flawed the idea of linguistic re-nationalisation through English may be (Sewell), there is no denying that many non-native English speaking countries have claimed English to be their own language. Their investment in their own brand of English may shape the future of Englishes in the world.

Questioning English is also essential for pedagogical reasons. Telling students that they do not have to imitate other people’s Englishes as they can make English their own is expected to give them a sense of ownership, confidence, and agency in their learning in and outside the classroom. They need an appreciation that their study of English and their encounter with its literary products is essentially an interlingual experience; it is an encounter of their own variety of English with the varieties of Englishes underlying literary texts written by British, American, Indian, African, and Bangladeshi authors. Allowing students to claim English and invest in it for identity and instrumentality can be a significant step towards removing the fear of English previously mentioned. Once they accept that English is their own language, as it is that of other people, they can get rid of its perceived foreignness and be its master and not its slave. Interrogating English is needed to end our enslavement and its exclusive control by the postcolonial elite in the interest of social equality. Such an interrogation is needed to claim our place in the world by representing who we are using the language so it can speak for us and not against us.

### **Conclusions and way forward**

I have argued in this article that the English of the English curriculum has remained underexamined and almost unquestioned in Bangladesh. I have drawn on theoretical insights provided by postcolonial theory, world Englishes, and Southern epistemologies. I have utilised mainly my personal experience of studying English and my reflection thereof. The motivation for my interrogation of English was derived from my research on English from world Englishes and Southern perspectives.

I have suggested that although the field of Applied Linguistics has seen the development of a critical stream that has questioned English and presented its various theorisations in a globalised world, the study of English Literature seems not to have embraced these developments for the enrichment of the study of English. As I have pointed out, the ongoing insularity of English studies in Bangladesh may have been maintained by professional rivalry between the fields

of English Literature and Applied Linguistics and ELT. One way of addressing the rivalry might be to open more linguistic departments in public universities which may house Applied Linguistics and ELT, distancing it from English Literature. This may be a way for the English Literature departments to initiate curriculum reforms including the interrogation of English.

As I have indicated, the context of English in the English curriculum needs to be recognised as an inter-varietal context where students and academics meet many Englishes, including native and non-native. However, their own English cannot be submerged within these input varieties. A meaningful epistemic encounter demands that they meet these other Englishes with their own variety of English on equal terms. Their participation in academic discourse requires consciousness of their own English as well as the other Englishes which deserve their respect, critique, and appreciation. Challenging the Inner Circle English should be an essential part of their epistemic engagement. Students and academics may buy non-local literary products, but they will produce the output that suits their local taste and dietary requirements.

A practical question here may be about the model of English for the study of English Literature in Bangladesh. Providing a straightforward answer to this question may be difficult, but what is clear is that this cannot be an exogenous or native variety of English. This is due to epistemological, political as well as ethical reasons. As many authors writing in English have argued, it has to be a new kind of English. In this postcolonial spirit, we may adopt the world Englishes paradigm to highlight local features and ways of using English. Scholars have noted the potential emergence of Bangladeshi English as a local variety (Banu; Hamid, “Bangladeshi English”). The potential growth in Bangladeshi literature in English may provide a fertile ground for this variety to flourish. However, prescribing Bangladeshi English or any specific variety may be discordant with the current trend of translinguistics (Dovchin and Lee) or entangled Englishes (Pennycook). What is probably needed is Southern ways of English (Hamid, “English as a Southern language”) that can illustrate its entanglements as well as translinguistic manifestations as part of a dehegemonising and decolonising project.

A further practical question is how we can develop this consciousness among students and teachers about the interrogation of English. Incorporating one course along with the foundational English courses about the journey of English into the undergraduate programme would be ideal. However, if the curriculum is already over-crowded and cannot accommodate another course, the English departments may think about diversifying their teaching and learning by including an online module on the journey of English for students’ self-study. The suggested innovation will need investment, but the investment is expected to bring optimum returns by encouraging students to own the language and make it their own. And if they can claim the ownership of English, it will produce many

pedagogical benefits for the study of English in the country. The innovation may also contribute to shaping our own ways of using English and promoting our English in the global village of Englishes, an undeniable sociolinguistic reality of English in our time.

The growth and popularity of English-medium schools in the country has the potential to shape our own ways of English. However, informed by social elitism, this stream of education seems to be pursuing the so-called native variety of English, denigrating Bangladeshi English (Jahan and Hamid). A reorientation to local and Southern ways of English in English-medium schools may be achieved by engagement with school leadership and negotiating English language reforms.

Finally, the time is ripe for the English Literature curriculum to include at least one course on Bangladeshi authors writing in English (Quayum and Hasan). This literature may be less developed at the moment compared to its counterpart in other South Asian societies such as India, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka. However, providing curricular legitimacy to the growing body of this literature will be a great way of encouraging the growth and inviting potential authors to exercise their full creative potential in their own English (Akhter).

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