

The Effectiveness of English Proficiency Courses taught at Undergraduate Level: the Bangladeshi Students' Perspective

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Abstract

The English proficiency courses are designed to prepare lower level students for entry to higher education through developing communication and language skills. In Bangladesh, English is extensively used in education system from the primary to the tertiary level as well as in various professions. So proficiency in English is very necessary for the Bangladeshi students. For academic purpose this study investigates into “The Effectiveness of English Proficiency Courses Taught at undergraduate level: The Bangladeshi Students' Perspective”. It tries to find out whether the proficiency courses taught at the undergraduate level have been effective or not for the students to continue their higher studies in Bangladesh. The study suggests certain remedial measures to make the proficiency courses more effective for the undergraduate students. The study finds that all students have expressed their need for English courses at university. They need English proficiency courses to better equip themselves for higher level education. The study reveals that the students have given equal emphasis on both writing and speaking skills. The students mentioned that for class presentation, asking questions in the class, writing answers during examination and writing assignments in English is necessary in their major courses at the university.

Keywords: English for academic purposes; Proficiency in English; English for specific purposes; communicative function of language, language skills

Introduction

The students of Bangladesh learn English as a compulsory subject from their primary school level till the end of their pre-university schooling that is, for twelve years. But the standard of the students' proficiency in English has been going down steadily over the years. The problem seems to indicate that in our education sector there is a great mismatch between the expectation from schools regarding the teaching of English and the performance of the students at the tertiary level. Even after 12 years of study of English at secondary and higher secondary levels, the students do not learn English language well enough to go beyond the elementary level. They memorize answers for passing examinations at secondary and higher secondary levels. However, after admission into university, they realize that they need more English than what they had memorized for doing well in the examinations. That is why some English proficiency courses are designed to prepare lower level students for entry into higher education through understanding and analysis to develop communication and language skills and language for reading and thinking about a wide range of study material making useful notes, and writing assignments.

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Post-independence English was de-emphasized in education and replaced by Bangla in all official domains in Bangladesh. Books were translated into Bangla to meet the demands of the universities; as a result the standard of English fell to abysmal depths in public schools and universities. However almost 95% of the texts and reference books are in English, thus Bangla has failed to become an adequate medium for higher education. The schools and colleges are not helping the learners much in developing proficiency in English language (Majid, 2007).

The present national school and college curricula of Bangladesh have come a long way from the old-fashioned method of teaching, where the students were taught their second language mainly by memorizing grammatical structures. Under the current national school or college curriculum, Bangladeshi students of English have an opportunity to use English particularly in oral or written communication, but the reality mirrors a different scenario altogether when we see the standard of English in our students wishing to be admitted in different universities. In reality, the majority of the students have acquired their English in a teacher-centered environment that discourages individual thought and creativity. When they reach the more advanced stages of their education, the universities face a difficult task to teach them communication and language skills to better equip them with their desired courses and degrees, like Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA), Bachelor Science in Computer Science and/or Engineering.

Given the crucial demands for English at the workplace, public universities have to comply with the demands of industry if they want their graduates to be employable. In order to improve the English proficiency of local graduates; compulsory EAP courses have been implemented in all public universities from the 1994-95 academic sessions, in accordance with the Ministry of Education and the University Grants Commission's instructions. In EAP courses, the students are exposed to the expectations and requirements of their faculty particularly to the target language situation (Jordan, 1997:80). According to Dudley – Evans and St. John (1998:36-37), the EAP courses also help foreign students from non-English speaking countries to achieve their full academic potential in an environment where English is the sole medium of instruction. EAP courses generally focus on “common-core academic language and skills”. (Dudley-Evans and St John,1998:36). In an EAP course, students are expected to acquire receptive and perceptive academic skills parallel to developing learning strategies and study skills (Jordan, 1997). The contents of an EAP course as outlined by Jordan (1997), are classroom based oral presentation skills, understanding lectures, note-taking and note-making skills, academic writing, academic reading and vocabulary, and academic speech and pronunciation.

The English courses are very common in countries where English is a foreign language. It is the medium of instruction in higher education. In Bangladesh, English is seen as a resource for national development because of its role in the global economy, science and technology. In our secondary and higher secondary levels, English is taught not as a medium of instruction but as a compulsory foreign language. For various reasons such as the limited and rare exposure to English as well as the quality of instruction they receive at this stage, students' competency in English is far below the level that is needed in tertiary education in which English is the medium

of instruction for majors in the respective fields of study. Thus, English has been accepted as a modern-day asset, and is considered to be of key importance to national development, social and economic advancement.

The students need a high level of English in order to be successful in their major courses. In order to enhance these students' language proficiency, both public and private universities in Bangladesh have a special English language teaching program named the foundation English courses or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. The aim of these courses is to provide learners with the level and type of English that they need to pursue academic specializations in which subjects are taught in English. That is why it is necessary to evaluate their progress in those courses to justify the effectiveness of these English proficiency courses.

Statement of the Problem

English proficiency courses are designed to prepare lower level students for entry to higher education through developing communication and language skills. Now, it is necessary to evaluate their progress in those courses. In Bangladesh, English is extensively used in education system from the primary up to the tertiary level as well as in various professions. Therefore, proficiency in English is very necessary for Bangladeshi students for academic purpose. English is taught as a subject only in secondary and higher secondary levels and the main focus of the students is on passing the examination, not on going proficiency in English. As a result, in spite of having learned English for twelve years in secondary and higher secondary level, when the students enroll into university they face difficulties to use English effectively. However, students need to use English extensively for the academic purposes. All the subjects are taught in English and books are in English. Moreover, English is used as the medium of instructions in the classroom.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because few studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of the English proficiency courses at the tertiary level. The undergraduate students are required to be proficient in English for their academic purposes. The present study is very significant to justify whether the proficiency courses taught at the undergraduate level have been effective or not for the students to continue their higher studies at different universities in Bangladesh. The present study is a case study to assess the nature of development of the students in their proficiency in English language. Therefore, this study is significant for developing future English proficiency courses.

Objectives of the Study

As mentioned before, the English proficiency courses at undergraduate level are designed to prepare low proficiency students for entry to higher education, the objective this study will be to investigate the progress of students to meet their demand to pursue higher education at tertiary level.

This study will try to justify the hypothesis that the English proficiency courses improve the performance of the low proficiency students' English language skills required for their major subjects at undergraduate level. Therefore, the objective of the current research is to find out the answers to the following questions:

- Do the English language courses bring any change in the English proficiency level of the learners in the four language skills?
- Do the language courses meet academic needs of students at the tertiary level?

Review of Relevant Research

There are many studies carried out in the field of the needs of English proficiency courses at undergraduate level around the world. Some of the important works related to the present study are reviewed here.

Chaudhury (2009) carried out a study on identifying the English language needs of humanities students at Dhaka University and found from the teachers' feedback that their students' abilities fell short for the proficiency level that was required to academically succeed at the tertiary level. In this study, the needs of the students were also identified. The students suggested that some changes in teaching style were needed to make the English courses more effective.

Tamimi and Shuib (2009) carried out a study to identify Petroleum Engineering students' motivation and attitudes towards learning the English language in Yemen. The findings showed the student's positive attitudes toward the English language. The students expressed in the study that they are interested in improving their proficiency in English language. The students have greatest desires to learn English language for both professional and academic purposes. The study revealed that the students could not develop their proficiency in English language at the secondary level. This is why they failed to cope with the academic requirements at the university. The study also showed that the students realized the importance of English language for the development of their country. The study suggested that both English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) should be implemented.

Alam and Sinha (2009) studied the issue of developing listening skills for tertiary level learners. They presented practical and effective tasks and materials that were appropriate for the Bangladeshi university context and thus would develop learners' proficiency in academic English. They suggested using non-native English texts such as recorded news or conversations from Bangladeshi TV channels instead of using authentic materials at least for the first few classes as our students were not taught listening skills in the secondary or higher secondary levels.

Majid (2007) identified some strategies used by Bangladeshi students who improved fluency in spoken English. Her study revealed that tertiary level students were needed to make oral presentations on different topics. This improved their speaking proficiency. At the same time, it motivated them to attain this language skill. She further mentioned that teachers needed to motivate the students and teach them the effective techniques of speaking skill.

Khan (2000) evaluated the English Foundation Courses at the Faculty of Arts at Dhaka University. She found that the students realized the necessity of English as an international

language. The students realized that English had been important for their future career development, for accessing higher education and for communication. The study of Khan revealed that most of the students thought that the course was useful to a certain extent. The students in this study mentioned that the course did not fulfill their expectations because they did not improve their listening and speaking skills. This is why the students suggested the extension of the course duration and a separate course on speaking skill. This study is directly related to the current study.

Quader (1999) investigated a study among the Bangladeshi students' reading habit and found that the students with Bengali medium background in Bangladesh are mostly very weak at reading English. These students have some characteristics in common. These are predictors or symptoms as well as causes of their being weak at reading in English. Three of them are:

- a) The weak readers' input through reading is irregular in nature and insufficient in amount.
- b) The weak readers do not comprehend what they read in English. In consequence, reading appears very hard and boring to them.
- c) They find reading difficult also because they do not have the essential schematic knowledge.

Besides, reading becomes more difficult for them if the context contains vocabulary with a different meaning from what they already know.

Thus, Quader has found out how to identify poor readers of English but she has not pointed out why the students have these problems or how they can be overcome.

Rahman (2006) carried out a study on orientation and motivation in English language learning of Bangladeshi students at undergraduate level. He mentioned in his study that the language courses at undergraduate level were need-based and aimed to develop skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. The investigation found that the students were needed to complete communication and academic skills courses to better equip them for higher level education and to compete in the job markets.

Sultana (2008) studied about writing and her study revealed that writing was an essential English language skill for academic purposes as well as future career for the students of our country. She mentioned in her study that writing had been neglected at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Teachers made the students write on a given topic and they corrected the product. They corrected only grammatical errors. She added that this practice was not a good way to achieve higher level of writing competence. That is why she suggested for the teachers to use the different approaches for writing like the product approach, process approach and genre approach.

Chaudhury (2010) conducted a study at Dhaka University on the methods and practice in the EAP classroom to know what occurred in the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) classrooms. This study attempted to accurately and historically describe the teaching/learning situation for the students of the four faculties at Dhaka University and to identify their specific English language needs. The study finds that the need exists for the development of an appropriate EAP syllabus which must include real world applications to be used as practice for all the four language skills. The English courses must be relevant and specific for the various disciplines. The findings have implications for future curriculum development.

The present study is interested in identifying the improvement of four required academic skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some past studies (Alam and Sinha, 2009; Majid, 2007;

Khan, 2000) identified the improvement of listening and speaking skills. The effectiveness of reading and writing skills are also revealed in the previous research (Quader, 1999; Sultana, 2008). The other previous studies (Chaudhury, 2009; Rahman, 2008; Tamimi et al., 2009; Chaudhury, 2010) are related to the current study to decide the overall effectiveness of the English proficiency courses. All the aforementioned studies have not pointed out the effectiveness of all four language skills together. Therefore, the present research tries to find out whether the proficiency courses taught at the undergraduate level have been effective or not for the students to continue their higher education.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Procedure

A prior study was conducted before the actual data collection period to test validity of the questionnaire as well as to get feedbacks and suggestions from the respondents.

Respondents of this Research

The study focuses on second year undergraduate students from three academic departments at a private university in Bangladesh. There were a total of sixty respondents involved in this study. The departments are represented in the following proportions: Business (20 students), Computer Engineering (20 students), English & Humanities (20 students). All of the subjects were engaged in full-time study. The questionnaires were distributed to the students in order to collect data for analysis.

Research Instrument

For the purpose of the study a questionnaire was used as instrument. The contents of the questionnaire are crucial for the present research because they have direct relations to the research questions and objectives. The analysis of the data was based on the students' responses to thirteen (13) questions including both open ended and closed type. For closed type questions they were required a grading of alternatives from *very important* to *not needed at all*. In addition to this questionnaire, interviews on learners were carried out to assess learners' improvement of proficiency in English language.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to sixty (60) second-year undergraduate students. These students completed all the three English proficiency courses in the first year. All the copies were collected back from the students for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The findings of the present study are shown in the tables, and then narrative description is presented in the text in a quantitative manner. Finally, the data is interpreted in the contextual and the descriptive methods.

Presentation and Interpretation of Findings

Presentation of Data

The findings of the present study have been shown in the tables. The presentation of the findings of 13 questions is presented in Table 1–16 below.

Question 1 (a) Do you like English classes?

TABLE 1: Students' views on liking of English classes N=60

Yes (%)	No (%)
100	0

In response to stating learners' attitudes towards their liking of English classes, all the respondents answered in the affirmative. Surprisingly, nobody reported in the negative.

Question 1(b): Give reasons for your liking English classes.

TABLE 2: Students' views about the reasons for liking English classes

Reasons for liking of English classes	Responses (%)
To develop English language skills	65
Helpful for future career	18
Importance as a global language	5
Interesting classes	12

Most of the students (65%) mentioned developing language skills as a reason for liking the English language classes. In contrast, they (18%) preferred English classes for career development in future. Other students (12%) expressed that they attended English classes because English classes were very interesting. Only 5% students liked English classes realizing the fact that English had become a global language. .

Question 2: What is your attitude towards the four language skills?

TABLE 3: Students' views on attitudes towards language skills

Skills	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Not so important (%)	Not needed at all (%)
Listening	70	13	17	0
Speaking	87	10	3	0
Reading	77	17	6	0
Writing	88	9	3	0

In response to stating learners' attitudes towards language skills the majority (88%) of the students considered writing skill as 'very important'. The other skill that was equally important was speaking (87% respondents). The third place in the list of preferences was reading skill considered by 77% (46 students). The last place was listening skill reported by 77% respondents.

Question 3: Which skill/s do you need to improve most for your academic improvement at the university?**TABLE 4: Students' views of English skill/s that needed to improve N=60**

Skills	(%)
Listening	68
Speaking	95
Reading	80
Writing	100

100% students preferred writing as their first priority. Secondly, speaking was reported as second in their preference list. 95% students expressed their choices for that. 80% students considered reading skill after the speaking skill. At last, (68%) 41 respondents reported the listening skill as the least important skill between the four language skills.

Question 4(a): Did learning English at your school or college improve your language skills?**TABLE 5: Students' views about English skills learnt at school or college N=60**

Yes (%)	No (%)
22	78

Interestingly, majority (78%) of the learners answered in the negative for learning English language skills at school or college. Only 22% (13) students answered in the affirmative.

Question 4(b): Did learning English at your school or college improve your language skills?**TABLE 6: Students' views on the reasons responsible for not learning English skills**

Reasons responsible for not learning English skills at school and college levels	Responses (%)
Learning English as a subject for getting better grades	30
No real life English learning	12
No listening and speaking skills practice	20
No trained English language teachers	17
Improvement of reading and writing skills	21

Many (30%) students commented that they learnt English as a subject for getting high marks or better grades but not developing language proficiency. Other learners (20%) mentioned the absence of listening and speaking skills. Some other students (17%) mentioned lack of qualified English teachers at schools or colleges. Only a few students (21%) expressed that they improved language skills and learnt some useful grammatical elements.

Question 5(a): Do you need the English courses at the university?**TABLE 7: Students' views on the need of English courses at university N=60**

Yes (%)	No (%)
100	0

In response to stating learners' need of English courses at university, all (100%) the respondents expressed their need of English courses at university. As expected, nobody reported 'no'.

Question 5(b): Explain why you need the English courses at the university level.**TABLE 8: Students' views on reasons for the need of English courses at university**

Reasons for the need of English courses	Responses (%)
University education is in English	62
For improving English	15
No English skills development in secondary or higher secondary level	17
Communication skills development	6

Here most (62%) of the learners realized equally that English had been important for higher education at tertiary level.

Question 6: Which one of the following activities do you have to do in English in your major course at the university?**TABLE 9: Students' views on English language activities needed for major courses N=60**

Activities	Yes (%)	No (%)
Class presentation	100	0
Speak with teachers	47	53
Ask questions in the class	100	0
Write answers during exam	100	0
Write assignments	100	0

Almost all the students expressed that class presentation (100%), asking questions in the class (100%), writing answers during examination (100%) and writing assignments (100%) were necessary to be done in English in their major courses at the university.

Question 7: Which reading activities do you need to improve your English at the university level?**TABLE 10: Students' views on Reading activities needed to improve English**

Language skill	Activities	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Not so important (%)	Not needed at all (%)
Reading	Understanding the details of a text	78	20	2	0
	Identifying key ideas	87	13	0	0
	Understanding organization of a text	88	12	0	0
	Understanding subject related vocabulary	93	7	0	0

The findings in Table 10 show that the majority (93%) of the subjects had great desires towards understanding subject related vocabulary.

Question 8: Which writing activities do you need to improve your English at the university level?**TABLE 11: Students' views on writing activities needed to improve English**

Language skill	Activities	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Not so important (%)	Not needed at all (%)
Writing	Summarizing , writing class notes	85	12	3	0
	Planning written assignment	90	10	0	0
	Expressing ideas in correct English	100	0	0	0
	Using appropriate academic style	80	20	0	0
	Writing well-organized paragraphs using appropriate words	93	7	0	0

The evidence from table 11 suggests that expressing ideas in correct English (100%), writing well-organized paragraphs using appropriate words (93%) and planning written assignment (90%) play the most important roles in writing for academic purposes, while using appropriate academic style (80%) and summarizing class notes (85%) appear to be somewhat less important.

Question 9: Which listening activities do you need to improve your English at the university level?**TABLE 12: Students' views on listening activities needed to improve English**

Language skill	Activities	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Not so Important (%)	Not needed at all (%)
Listening	Understanding the main ideas of lectures	95	5	0	0
	Understanding the lectures' accent	30	5	65	0
	Taking brief, clear notes	58	20	22	0
	Understanding key vocabulary	93	7	0	0

The evidence from table 12 suggests that understanding the main ideas of lectures (95%) was very important for most of the respondents. However, understanding key vocabulary (93%) was also considered very important by 56 students.

Question 10: Which speaking activities do you need to improve your English at the university level?**TABLE 13: Students' views on speaking activities needed to improve English**

Language skill	Activities	Very important (%)	Important (%)	Not so Important (%)	Not needed at all (%)
Speaking	Communicating ideas confidently	88	12	0	0
	Speaking clearly in correct pronunciation	50	28	22	0
	Communicating ideas fluently	82	18	0	0
	Asking questions	77	23	0	0
	Speaking accurately in correct English	45	25	30	0

Table 13 shows that majority (88%) of the subjects reported that communicating ideas confidently was very important expressed by 53 out of 60 students.. 82% respondents reported that communicating ideas fluently was very important.

**Question 11(a): Do you think your English courses at the university have been useful for you?
14: Students' views on usefulness of English courses at university N=60**

Yes (%)	No (%)
100	0

In response to stating learners' attitudes towards the usefulness of English courses at university, all the learners (100%) expressed their need of English courses at university. Nobody reported 'no' in this regard.

Question 11(b): Explain why the English courses have been useful for you.

TABLE 15: Students' views on the areas of achieved development of language skills

Areas of achieved development	Responses (%)
Reading and writing skills	52
Oral presentation skills	30
Listening and speaking skills	18

After completing the English courses, all the students pointed out their confidence in their reading and writing (52%), speaking and listening skills (18%). Remarkably, 30% learners improved in oral presentation skills.

Question 12: Which activities do you consider least useful?

Interestingly, no students considered any of the language activities as least useful.

Question 13: What are your suggestions to make the courses more effective?

TABLE 16: Suggestions of the students on making the courses more effective

Student's suggestions	Responses (%)
More than two classes a week	25
English club should be more active along with English courses	18
Should develop listening and speaking skills	37
Grammar practice should be included in English courses	20

The learners pointed out that they needed more classes on English (25%), specially listening and speaking would be helpful for them. At the same time, they suggested for more activities of language club (18%) to enhance listening and speaking abilities. In addition, they (20%) mentioned about the practice of grammar for writing grammatically correct sentences.

Interpretation of Findings

As the focus of the undergraduate academic English syllabus is on the communicative functions of language, the main aim of the English courses is to provide ample opportunities for students to use English for a variety of purposes in interesting situations. The courses provide a range of tasks and activities designed to enable students to practice the different skills, sometimes individually and sometimes in pairs or groups. The responses revealed that the majority of the students attend classes to develop their language skills.

Majority of the students answered that they did not improve their language skills at schools and colleges. Only a few students answered positively. This is because the syllabus of secondary and higher secondary levels is examination-oriented rather than achieving communicative competence. However the English syllabus of secondary and higher secondary school certificate is on the basis of communicative language teaching and learning method to develop four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing.

As a result, most public and private universities in Bangladesh offer English courses to the undergraduates. These courses aim to equip students with the necessary academic study skills in English so that they can cope with their studies as the different courses are conducted in English and the course materials and references are found in English. These are usually English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. All undergraduates have to take three semesters of English. They have to take EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses that are relevant to his/her areas of study such as English for Business (for the Economics and Business Faculties), English for Science and Technology (for the Faculty of Science and Technology), English for Law (for the Faculty of Law) and so on. So, the EAP courses develop the academic competency of the learners. EAP courses generally focused on “common-core academic language and skills”. (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998:36)

The findings of the study show that the learners have given equal emphasis on both writing and speaking skills. The highest number of students considered these two skills important for academic success. Writing skill is the most important language skill at undergraduate level because students' grades are largely determined by their performance in written assignments, tests and examinations (Leki & Carson, 1994). Speaking skill is important because the undergraduate students are required to give oral presentations, present works in classes, express ideas and views properly in any academic situation, speak with course instructors confidently on academic matters, participate and speak in group discussions.

The other two important skills mentioned by the learners for academic improvement at the university are reading and listening. With regard to reading skill, 80% students considered that it was important for academic success. The learners considered that understanding the details of a text and identifying key ideas were equally important for academic readings of their major courses. Yet another important academic skill is listening. Listening to English is particularly important at the tertiary level because they need to comprehend the language of classrooms and lecture halls (Hedge, 2003).

In EAP courses, reading is a crucial skill for students at undergraduate level. In this regard, Robinson (1991) concedes that reading is probably the most needed skill in EAP and Fishman (1977) also states that reading is vital when studying in a university where the medium of instruction is English. The current study reveals that vocabulary knowledge is crucial to reading comprehension.

Learners' knowledge of discourse and text structure has also been reported to affect reading comprehension. For example, understanding coherence, or superficially non-existent relations between sentences, is a determining factor in reading comprehension (Taylor, 1985). Text type, topic, genre and writer's style have also been recognized as factors affecting reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000, pp 83, 127). There are five text types: descriptive, narrative, expository, argumentative, and instructive. As Johnson (1998, p. 22) points out that narrative texts are mainly read for enjoyment, expository texts have the goal of giving information, and therefore, narrative texts can never be comprehended; they can only be experienced.

The findings of writing activities by the students suggest that communicating their ideas appropriately, accurately and smoothly is very important for the learners compared to other academic writing activities. The student writer has to create a text that is both rhetorically and linguistically appropriate (Firkins et al., 2007). Next important activity is writing well-organized paragraphs using appropriate words.

After that the students mentioned about the necessity of planning written assignments. There are different stages of writing assignments to make a process writing rather than a product writing. The stages are pre-writing, drafting, editing and finally proofreading. Next, summarizing is important for the students to write main ideas of a piece of writing and finally using appropriate academic style is important for students at undergraduate level.

The investigation finds that most of the students consider understanding the main ideas of lectures and key vocabulary is very important for listening activities. Hedge (2003) has pointed out that training second language learners in listening to English is particularly important at the tertiary level because they need to comprehend the language of classrooms and lecture halls.

Hedge (2003) contends that listening is more than comprehension and it depends on the purpose of listening. Hedge supports Brown and Yule (1983) who argue that comprehension is reached when the listener arrives at a reasonable interpretation of the speaker's intention. This is a pragmatic and achievable target for second language learners. Richards (1985) states that the listeners make use of both knowledge of the syntax of the target language and real world knowledge for listening comprehension.

The students also mentioned about the importance of taking class notes clearly. For effective listening students must realize that academic lectures are more formal and consist of specialized vocabulary. A major difficulty of listening to lectures has to write down points as students listen. Note taking should be addressed in the language class as it pertains to both listening and study skills. As Jordan (1997: 188) points out that note taking as a skill is not easy in a foreign language; the difficulties can become very serious.

The investigation finds that most students emphasize on communicating ideas fluently and confidently for speaking activities. This is important for their presentation activities at the universities. Speaking for academic purposes is used to describe spoken language in various academic settings (Jordan, 1997). However, the current study discovers that the students with regard to pronunciation and accuracy are reluctant to improve.

In response to learners' views on the usefulness of English courses, the present investigation shows that the students have improved less in listening and speaking. They expressed that

although they had some background knowledge, they were unable to comprehend class lectures. Research findings indicate that the problems can be grouped into three main areas, which are:

- Decoding – Identifying what is said
- Comprehending – Understanding the points of the lecture
- Taking notes – Recording or writing down the ideas and points presented (Jordan, 1997:179).

Students who have some experience of listening in English may be able to deal with straightforward decoding; yet they still need to appreciate the special qualities of Academic English for better comprehension. For this reason, it is felt that students require extra work on developing their ability to listen to lectures. For effective listening students must realize that the register of academic lectures is more formal and consists of specialized vocabulary.

Although the present study reveals that the learners have improved in oral presentation skills they have not developed in speaking skills. This is because they have not got ample opportunity to practice spoken English like taking part in conversation or debate regularly.

No students thought any of the language activities as least useful. It reveals that all the language activities in English language proficiency courses have been effective for them.

The study shows that the learners felt about time constraints for these courses involved not more than 35 hours of classes over a single semester. Therefore, they suggested extending class hours for better language skills practice. They also mentioned about the role of language club to facilitate the English language skills practices in a more or less formal and relaxed setting.

Interviews with students revealed that their academic English courses focused heavily on reading and writing skills. That is why they felt that more practice on speaking skills, listening comprehension, note-taking, conversation, formal presentation and pronunciation would have been helpful for them.

The students opined that note-taking skills were essential for success in their courses and students frequently had difficulties with note-taking. For this reason the learners suggested that they could be benefited if the course instructors regularly collected and examined their lecture notes. The students mentioned in the interview with course instructor that they struggled with class participation because of the lack of confidence in their own speaking abilities. They expressed that formal speaking was difficult for them.

Interviews with students revealed that they had difficulty in subject-specialist vocabulary and writing grammatically correct sentences to express complex ideas.

Conclusion and implications

This study aimed at investigating the progress of students to meet their demand to pursue higher education at tertiary level. The present study entitled “The Effectiveness of English Proficiency Courses Taught at Undergraduate Level: Bangladeshi Students’ Perspective” has achieved its objectives. The study has identified the effectiveness of the English proficiency courses for the students at undergraduate level in Bangladesh. The first hypothesis of the implication of improving the English proficiency levels of the learners in the four language skills is answered

here. The second hypothesis, that is the learners' achievement of academic proficiency of English for undergraduate level is also answered.

The present study is a case study to assess the nature of development of the students in their proficiency in English language. Therefore, this study is significant for future English proficiency courses. The outcome of the present study should have significance for the improvement of academic English skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing. This study will be also helpful for syllabus design and material development to make the English course more effective. The limitation of the study is the size and variety of the data which has been collected from a limited number of students. However, for a generalized and universal acceptance of these two hypotheses, data from large number of students can be collected for further research on this issue.

The present study has some implications for the English proficiency courses. Based on the findings, listening skills should be given more emphasis to develop the comprehension of class lectures and note taking. Speaking skill should be practiced more to enhance better performance in oral presentations. To make the courses more effective, class duration should be extended. There should be more grammar practice for writing error-free sentences. In addition, English language club should be formed to practice language skills in a less formal and relaxed setting.

The present study finds that the students need the English proficiency courses to better equip themselves for higher level education and to compete in the job markets which has been suggested in the previous research (Rahman, 2008; Tamimi et al., 2009). All the students revealed that the English classes were interesting because they have learnt English with funny language activities. The current study reveals that the students have given equal emphasis on both writing and speaking skills. Majority of the students express that their learning English skills at school or college level has not improved. All the students have expressed that class presentation, asking questions in the class, writing answers during examination and writing assignments are necessary to do in English in their major courses at the university that has been suggested in the past research (Majid, 2007; Sultana, 2008). In addition, the findings suggest that communicating ideas appropriately, accurately and smoothly is very important for the students for academic writing activity and communicating ideas fluently and confidently is important for speaking. The current study finds that understanding subject related vocabulary is needed for improving reading skill. However, Quader (1999) has only identified poor readers of English. The investigation finds that most of the students consider understanding the main ideas of lectures and key vocabulary is very important for listening activity. The present study finds that the students are of the opinion that the duration of the course should be extended and emphasis should be given on listening and speaking skills. This is also revealed in previous research (Khan, 2000). All the students pointed out their confidence in all language skills. The English proficiency courses have been effective for the learners.

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