

Effectiveness of the Practical English Language Programme as a Part of ESP for the Students of Agricultural Universities: A Case Study in Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University

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Abstract: To develop the students' English language proficiency, generally, the technical universities in Bangladesh offer English language courses at different levels under various titles. This case study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the Practical English Language Programme (PELP) that is taught in Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University as a part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to the undergraduate students. The study was carried out using mixed methodology that involves a five points' Likert scale questionnaire consisting of twelve statements under three variables and an open-ended question. The findings of the study show that the PELP is very crucial to assist students in English language skills improvement, psychological development, and soft skills enhancement. Based on the students' suggestions, a major recommendation has been made that the PELP should be a mandatory programme to be offered at several academic levels and it should be well-equipped with modern technological facilities i.e., English language lab and seminar library. The findings have implication for the concerned policy makers and English language teachers of the technical universities in Bangladesh to reconsider the importance and urgency of establishing PELP as a well-designed programme for their students to accelerate their English language proficiency required to perform better in both academic and professional life.

Keywords: Agricultural universities, ESP, English language improvement, psychological development

INTRODUCTION

The role of English as a language of communication in the world is undeniable. English is considered as a means that facilitates growth in other subjects (Albakrawi and Almutairi, 2013). According to Chen, Chang and Chang (2016), English is not only a school subject, but also a skill that requires substantial content knowledge. English is now considered as the most influential lingua franca in the global village as it is a part and parcel from academic to professional sectors. In academic spheres, English is taught to prepare the learners in order to overcome global linguistic challenges.

In Bangladesh, Agricultural Universities fall under the category of technical universities and those are Bangladesh Agricultural University; Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University; Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University; Khulna Agricultural University; Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Patuakhali Science and Technology University and; Sylhet Agricultural University. Besides, there are two private agricultural universities as well which are International University of Business Agriculture and Technology; and Exim Bank Agricultural University

Bangladesh. Every agricultural university offers Basic English language course at undergraduate level, except Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University. In addition, Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University (SAU) introduced Basic English language course in its four faculties which are faculty of Agriculture; faculty of Agribusiness Management; faculty of Animal Science and Veterinary Medicine; and faculty of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Science. Initially, the introduced English language courses were theory based which were conducted in all the faculties except the faculty of Fisheries that started with both theory and practical courses together.

Later on, it was observed that most of the students had fear of speaking English and faced obstacle to communicate even after 15 years of study approximately in preschool, school and college where English was taught as a subject rather than a language. Generally, almost everybody forgets the subject either studied in school or college but can remember how to play chess or cycling which is the result of practical learning. According to the teaching experiences of the faculty members of Language department of SAU, it is realised and decided that teaching English language to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners can be more effective by implementing practical courses along with theory as practical courses consolidate subject knowledge with real life practices, develop technical and cognitive skills, promote teamwork skills and increase motivation among the students. In broad sense, it is assumed that such kind of course will fortify students' English language learning skills development, psychological improvement and soft skills development.

Consequently, in 2017 along with the theory programme, the PELP was introduced at the undergraduate level in SAU with a special focus on practising speaking and listening in real life contexts. Usually, practical classes are small in size comparing to the theory classes which is easier for a facilitator to take care of every student specially the struggling ones. Moreover, different kinds of learning activities like group work, pair work, role play, drama, debate, presentation, peer feedback, testing and evaluation are organised in PELP to make them confident in both formal and informal scenarios. However, there is no listening lab and seminar library which could provide technical support to run the program more effectively and successfully as a part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP is an approach to language teaching and learning which is designed to meet specified needs of learners (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Strevens, 1988). Dudley-Evans and John (1998) define ESP in terms of absolute and variable characteristics. According to them the features of ESP are as follows:

- ESP is taught based on settling of specific needs of the learners.
- ESP makes use of methodologies and techniques of the discipline it serves.
- ESP is centered on the language, skills, discourse and genres that are the thought to be relevant to the course.
- ESP is designed for adult learners, either at the tertiary level of education or at the professional work places.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) propose two prominent levels of evaluation in the context of ESP i.e., learner assessment and course evaluation. Based on their view, evaluation of learners reflects not only the learners' performance but also, to some extent, the effectiveness of the course.

The literature review looks into the available previous research findings on evaluation of ESP courses around the world.

Saqlain and Simon (2012) in research resided that "Simulation method is more effective than lecture Method for teaching Business Communication course at BBA level in Pakisthani Classroom". Esteban and Marios (2002) showed in their research that "the ESP teacher task is to define students' learning needs and assume the role of language consultant."

Barron (1992) conducted a study on the effectiveness of an ESP course which was taught to the engineering students at their final academic year in university. His study showed that the engineering students taking the communication course produced work of better quality and were motivated when they received team-teaching involving collaboration between a language expert and a subject specialist including the sharing of classroom. Karimi et al. (2013) evaluated the Agricultural Extension and Rural Development ESP Textbook by analysing particular needs of a special group of learners which was

considered as an introductory part for evaluating an ESP textbook. They made use of Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) framework. Their study pointed out the adaptability of the content of these textbooks in agricultural extension and rural development regarding the learners' needs. The study also showed that students were interested to take part in the course.

Though various English language courses are taught in the agricultural universities in Bangladesh. However, there is a scarcity of scholarly documents demonstrating the nature and effectiveness of the offered courses. Hence, this research will obviously be a worthy effort to project the PELP with a view to presenting the current practice and also the potentialities of improving the course to the extent that will be able to cater students with the knowledge and skills of the English language that are sought for both in academic and professional spheres.

With this objective, the study aims to find out the answer of the following research question:

- To what extent the Practical English Language Programme (PELP) conducted at Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University is effective?

METHODOLOGY

This is exploratory research that aims to explore the effectiveness of the existing PELP that is taught at the undergraduate level students of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University. Following mixed methodology, the study includes both qualitative and quantitative data to elicit students' opinion regarding the effectiveness of the programme and seek their suggestions on how the program can be developed further.

Sampling

The study intends to take the opinion of those students only who participated in the English Practical Course. So, purposive sampling method was required to select the subjects of the study. Hence, seventy-five students from the three faculties of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University had been selected who took the course in their previous semester (Summer, 2019). The faculties were the Faculty of Agribusiness Management; the Faculty of Animal Science and Veterinary Medicine; and the Faculty of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Science.

Among the four faculties of the university, only these three faculties offer the English language Practical Course (I credit) as a mandatory course to be taken. Particularly, these students were selected as they had completed the course in their immediate past semester and were able to reflect their experience in detail regarding giving opinion in the questionnaire.

Instruments

As data collection tool, a five points Likert scale questionnaire consisting of three main variables were distributed to the target students. Each variable in the questionnaire includes four statements to elicit students' responses on the target areas. The first variable is "English Language Skills Development" and it includes statement number 1 to 4. The second variable is "Psychological Development" and it clusters with statement number 5 to 8. The third and final variable is "Soft Skills Enhancement" and its representative statements are 9 to 12 number. The questionnaire also contains an open-ended question to seek students' suggestions that we can consider to develop the Practical English language Programme further.

Data Collection

Following manual data collection process, the questionnaires were distributed to the target participants by the concerned course teachers of each group of students. Students from different groups were invited to come to the Department of Language at their convenient time where the concerned teacher of a particular group facilitated the inventory session by briefing them about the aim of the study and the contents of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were collected from them after they had completed.

Data Analysis

To analyse the quantitative data of the questionnaire, descriptive statistical method had been followed. In this process, mean of each statement under the three variables were calculated to mark the highest mean value in order to understand the students' agreement level to the statements. Finally, overall mean of each variable was calculated to obtain the answer of the research question that to what extent the PELP is effective for the agriculture students of SAU.

To interpret the results of these questionnaires, "strongly disagree" was indicated as Scale 1 (lowest value) and "strongly agree" was indicated as Scale 5 (highest value). Then, the result of the subtraction between the highest scale and the lowest scale was divided into three equal parts. Mean 1 to 2.33 was considered negative, from 2.34 to 3.67 was considered positive and 3.68 to 5.00 was considered highly positive. On the other hand, the responses to the open-ended question in the questionnaire were analysed descriptively to provide an in-depth discussion of the students' opinion. To make the discussion comprehensive, five major themes had been emerged under which all the students' responses were accumulated and discussed.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

To analyse the findings from the research question "To what extent the Practical English Language Programme (PELP) conducted at Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University is effective?", the presentation and the interpretation of the data are demonstrated as follows:

Students' View toward the Practical English Language Programme

Students' view on the effectiveness of the Practical English Language Programme (PELP) as a part of ESP have been presented through their view on English language skills development, psychological improvement and soft skills enhancement along with showing their means. The results are shown in the following tables

Table 1. Students' View on English Language Skills Development

Variable	English Language Skills Development	SL	Statements	Mean	Overall Mean
		1	Practical English Language Programme gave them much opportunity to improve their speaking skills, fluency, and pronunciation.	4.60	4.29
2	Practical English Language Programme increased their reading skills through enriching vocabularies, faster reading and better understanding.	4.19			
3	Practical English Language Programme enhanced their skills in basic academic and creative writing.	4.08			
4	Practical English Language Programme developed their listening skills to understand class lecture in English and native English speaking.	4.27			

Var. = Variable, St. =Statement

In the table no. 1, it is seen that most of the students' view about the Practical English Language Programme that gave them much opportunity to improve their speaking skills, fluency and pronunciation (St. No. 1) are highly positive (mean 4.60). In respect of the PELP which developed their listening skills to understand class lecture in English and native English speaking (St. No. 4), the students' view is highly positive (mean 4.27). Their view regarding the PELP which increased their reading skills through enriching vocabularies, faster reading and better understanding (St. No. 2) are also highly positive (mean 4.19).

Respondents' view about the PELP that enhanced their skills in basic academic and creative writing (St. No. 3) are also highly positive (mean 4.08). However, the overall view of the students regarding English language skills development (Var. no, 1) are also highly positive (mean 4.19)

Table 2. Students' View on Psychological Improvement

Variable	Psychological Improvement Development	SL	Statements	Mean	Overall Mean
		1	Practical English Language Programme made them confident in using English in both formal and real-life situation.	4.27	4.23
2	Practical English Language Programme built their interactive skills in classroom in terms of learner to learner and learner to teacher interaction.	4.12			
3	Practical English Language Programme decreased their shyness in public communication.	4.32			
4	Practical English language Programme built up their positive attitude towards classroom learning.	4.21			

Var. = Variable, St. =Statement

According to the table no. 2, it is clear that most of the students' view regarding the PELP that decreased their shyness in public communication (St. No. 3) are highly positive (mean 4.32). The opinion of the students about the PELP which made them confident in using English both in formal and real-life situation (St. No. 1) are highly positive (mean 4.27). The students' view in the respect of Practical English Language Programme which built up their positive attitude towards classroom learning (St. No. 4) are highly positive (mean 4.21). Their thought about the Practical English Language Programme which built their interactive skills in classroom in terms of learner to learner and learner to teacher interaction (St. No. 2) are highly positive (mean 4.12). At the same time, the overall view of the students on the psychological improvement (Var. No. 2) sounds highly positive (mean 4.23) too.

Table 3. Students' View on Soft Skills Enhancement

Variable	Soft Skills Enhancement	SL	Statements	Mean	Overall Mean
		1	Practical English Language Programme grew their leadership quality through the practice of presentation.	3.42	4.13
2	Practical English Language Programme developed their communication skills in both formal and real-life situation through practicing dialogue, interview, group work, pair work, and interacting with strangers.	4.54			
3	Practical English Language Programme built up their personality by making them extrovert from introvert.	4.33			
4	Practical English Language Programme developed their professional behavior in terms of showing appropriate gesture-posture, maintaining formal attire, giving self-introduction and approaching audience.	4.25			

Var. = Variable, St. =Statement

The table no. 3 shows that the biggest number of the students expressed their highly positive view (mean 4.54) about the Practical English language Programme that developed their communication skills in both formal and real-life situation through practising dialogue, interview, group work, pair work, and interacting with stranger (St. No. 2). The opinion of a good number of students regarding the PELP which built up their personality by making them extrovert from introvert (St. No. 3) are highly positive (mean 4.33). The view of the students in the respect of the Practical English Language Programme that developed their professional behavior in terms of showing appropriate gesture-posture, maintaining formal attire, giving self-introduction and approaching audience (St. No. 4) are also highly positive (mean 4.25), whereas the thought of some students regarding the Practical English Language Programme which grew their leadership quality through the practice of presentation (St. No.

1) are positive (mean 3.42). The overall finding of the respondents' view on soft skills enhancement (Var. No. 3) are also highly positive (mean 4.13).

However, as per the findings above, it is clearly seen that the students' view about English Language Skills Development have been figured out as the top most beneficence of the Practical English Language Programme. The other two variables (2 and 3) are also closer to the 1st variable's mean (respectively 4.23 and 4.13). It shows that all the components of PELP are highly effective for the students to ensure their holistic learning from the course.

FINDINGS FROM THE OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

By analysing the responses from the open-ended question, four major themes have been emerged which include the participants' opinion. These are discussed below:

Rethinking Classroom Arrangement

Most of the time the participants emphasised on maintaining small size class with longer duration than what they have at present. They also suggested increasing the number of classes with course books where they can practise more creative tasks such as pair works, group works, ice-breaking activities and add more practical courses at their undergraduate level to keep up the practices till the last semester. According to their opinion, it is understood that they might have realised the impact of the PELP for their future professional life through facing the different entry level competition as means of entrance to their career. They also thought that the skills of the PELP will be very much helpful to continue their professional career smoothly.

Developing English Language Skills by Increasing the Physical Facilities of the Language Class

Due to poor internet speed, many students could not participate and get proper feedback from their teachers. One said, "I have to remain anxious about internet interruption. It is hard to manage a continuing class." In addition, many talked about the costly data packages, which are not affordable for many.

Many reported that the interaction between teacher-student and student-student were less in online classes. Many did not have separate study rooms. One said, "I have to be alert always of the background noise that affects communicating with teachers." Many talked about the insufficient technical knowledge of the students. One mentioned, "I fail to react instantly in the class because of the continuous switching on and off the microphone."

Many said that they often did not get the recordings of online classes. Another complaint was they could not keep concentrating when the classes became lengthy. Many talked about their health issues. One said, "Online classes require constant staring at electronic devices, which causes headaches, migraine, eye problems, etc."

Increasing Real Life Oriented Learning Activities

According to the participants' suggestion, it is necessary to add more real-life based activities in their learning process i.e., interviews, dialogues, public speaking sessions and field trips which are already being practiced in the PELP. In addition, they also opined that conversation with native speakers could be added to the existing classroom practices so that they can be aware of the native pronunciation of English.

Adding Co-curricular Activities

Another striking finding is that, they are very enthusiastic to participate in the competitions like inter-faculty presentation competition; reading and reciting competition; drama and debate competition; reading and debate competition. They think that by performing these types of activities they will be able to interact with teachers and learners seamlessly and confidently not only in academic performance but also in professional career. It may benefit the whole academic environment of the University by gearing up communication among them.

Based on the above-mentioned analysis, the recommendation can be made that the necessity of establishing an English language lab and seminar library is the most significant and unique feature to be added with the current practice of the PELP. It is highly expected that the concerned authority will come forward to meeting the crying need of the students to exhilarate the current Practical English Language Programme.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study attempted to find out the effectiveness of the PELP at the undergraduate level in Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University. As per the findings of the study, the PELP is found as mostly effective (overall mean 4.29) for English language skills development. At the same time, it has been marked by them equally important to improve their psychological factors (overall mean 4.23) and enhance their soft skills (overall mean 4.13). Therefore, it can be said that the students' responses express a positive attitude toward the existing activities of the PELP for its numerous benefits and emphasize to continue with the updated technical facilities.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that more programmes like PELP should be introduced at advance levels of their studies in the universities to keep up the practice till the final semester. They urged to provide more opportunities to gear up their learning through real-life oriented and co-curricular activities. Especially, a seminar library, well-decorated with updated English language books for self-study and references, should be established. Moreover, an English language lab, well-equipped with the modern technological devices i.e., computers; sound systems; multimedia projector; bluetooth devices; and special sitting arrangements, should be complemented with classroom learning. These requirements are obvious to run the programme successfully with a view to ensuring more effective learning outcomes from the students.

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Appendix

Please put tick mark (√) as per your level of agreement to the statements. You are requested to respond to all the statements given below.

	SL	Statement	5. Strongly Agree	4. Agree	3. Neutral	2. Disagree	1. Strongly Disagree
English Language Skills Development	1	Practical English Programme (PEP) gave me much opportunity to improve my speaking skills, fluency, and pronunciation.					
	2	Practical English Programme increased my reading skills through enriching vocabularies, faster reading and better understanding.					
	3	Practical English Programme enhanced my skills in basic academic and creative writing.					
	4	Practical English Programme developed my listening skills to understand class lecture in English and native English speaking.					
Psychological Improvement	5	Practical English Programme made me confident in using English in both formal and real-life situation.					
	6	Practical English Programme built my interactive skills in classroom in terms of learner to learner and learner to teacher interaction.					
	7	Practical English Programme decreased my shyness in public communication.					
	8	Practical English Programme built up my positive attitude towards classroom learning.					
Soft Skills Enhancement	9	Practical English Programme grew my leadership quality through the practice of presentation.					
	10	Practical English Programme developed my communication skills in both formal and real life situation through practicing dialogue, interview, group work, pair work, and interacting with strangers.					
	11	Practical English Programme built up my personality by making me extrovert from introvert.					
	12	Practical English Programme developed my professional behavior in terms of showing appropriate gesture-posture, maintaining formal attire, giving self-introduction and approaching audience.					

*Please give your suggestion below regarding the Practical English Language Programme that you attended to consider for further betterment of this programme.