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Review Article

English Language Teaching at the Tertiary Level in Bangladesh: Trends, Challenges, and Institutional Responses

Sharmin Rahman Bipasha*

Lecturer, Department of English, CCN University of Science & Technology, Cumilla, Bangladesh

*** *Corresponding author:*** Sharmin Rahman Bipasha, Department of English, CCN University of Science & Technology, Cumilla, Bangladesh. Email: bipasha2006ru@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The current context of English language teaching (ELT) in tertiary education in Bangladesh is a confluence of several issues such as globalization, employability pressure, multilingual nationhood and a polarized public–private higher education system. There is a growing emphasis on communicative competence, outcome-based education (OBE), English-medium instruction (EMI), and learner-centered pedagogy in the national policy and institutional strategy, but a disconnect remains between policy and practice. This study explores the trends, challenges, and institutional responses that have been shaping tertiary ELT in Bangladesh.

Methodology: This is a documentary secondary data integrative review, which is exploratory in nature and is synthesized narratively. After searching 5 databases and targeting specific institutional sources, 126 documents were kept, which comprised 62 peer-reviewed articles, 45 curriculum documents, 7 national policy documents, and 12 quality-assurance reports published between January 2010 and December 2025. A multi-level institutional analysis framework, combining Scott's three pillars of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive, and critical applied linguistics, was used in the analysis of the data.

Results: Three trends were found that converged: formal implementation of OBE frameworks, growth of ESP and EAP provision, and digital integration in the post-pandemic era. High tertiary student–teacher ratios, examination-driven pedagogy, uneven enactment of EMI, high levels of code-switching in the classroom, and a high level of variation in entry proficiency are all obstacles to these advances. Institutional responses, such as foundation programs, language centers, faculty development and employer engagement, are now commonplace but are not often assessed for longer-term impact.

Conclusion: The issue is not that the sector lacks a reform effort, but that the regulatory, normative and cultural-cognitive aspects of the sector are structurally misaligned, and that this inevitably leads to a form of performative compliance with ambitious mandates. To achieve sustainable improvement, policy adaptation needs to be contextually grounded, evaluation needs to be done longitudinally, teachers need ongoing development, and there needs to be more articulation between English provision and graduate employability. The study provides an integrated analytical framework for tertiary ELT reform, and a sequenced, provenance-labelled reform agenda.

1. Introduction

In post-1971 Bangladesh, English is in an ambivalent and contested position in a national discourse which sees Bengali as the language of identity and anticolonial struggle (Hamid & Jahan,

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2015). The 1952 Language Movement, the first mass mobilization for linguistic rights in Asia, was the first step towards the Liberation War of 1971, and Bengali was thus symbolized as a language of sovereignty. English is, at the same time, as Hamid (2016) calls it, a linguistic market, a network of economic and cultural capital, where English proficiency is a key determinant for social mobility, access to higher education, and entry to the global knowledge economy. Nationalist ideology and market demand have been the two forces that have shaped the education policy for the past 50 years (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014). It manifests itself institutionally in the form of mixed-medium teaching in public universities and English-medium instruction (EMI) policy in private universities, resulting in a split tertiary sector.

The size of that sector has evolved very quickly, and figures need to be time-stamped. As per the University Grants Commission (UGC) circular mentioned below, the regulated sector of the universities consisted of 151 public and private universities with about 600,000 students and over 30,000 teachers (Jasim, 2021; University Grants Commission of Bangladesh [UGC], 2020). As of 2025, there were 57 public and 116 private universities, along with three international and two specialized institutions that are registered by UGC (UGC, 2025). These counts are for the traditional "campus" universities. The figures are much higher, however, if we include the National University's affiliating college system and Bangladesh Open University (Bangladesh Open University, 2020), as total tertiary enrolment in Bangladesh is much more than four million. For the purpose of this article, the campus-university numbers are used unless otherwise stated, as these are the institutions directly under the UGC accreditation and OBE policy.

There are three pressures that are related and that increase the importance of tertiary English: the pressures of employability, internationalization, and access to knowledge that circulates globally. The growing demand from employers for English-communicative graduates has been found in the sectors of business process outsourcing, information technology, ready-made garments, and services (Roshid & Chowdhury, 2013). However, empirical evidence shows that there is a continuing proficiency gap. Hasan et al. (2024) conducted a study on 154 undergraduate and graduate students in a private university in Dhaka, which revealed a significant gap between the skills required by employers and the content of the curriculum in the university. Bangladesh's EF English Proficiency Index score of 500 is at the low end of the moderate proficiency level (EF Education First, 2024). The score is better than in previous years but is not population-representative since it is based on a self-selected sample of online test takers. The limitations of proficiency have an impact on job prospects for graduates and on the performance of the institutions in international rankings based on research output and international recruitment (Rahman & Hu, 2025).

There is a disjuncture between policy and classroom practice, evidenced in the documents. The focus of national policy documents and institutional mission statements is on communicative competence, learner-centered pedagogy and outcome-based education (OBE), which is explicitly mentioned in the revised tertiary accreditation standards of the UGC (2016). Independent observation and mixed methods studies, however, reveal that examination-based pedagogy, lack of peer interaction, and high reliance on the transmission of grammatical rules and high-stakes written exams with strong negative washback are entrenched in the system (Ali & Hamid, 2020, 2023; Ali et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2018, 2019, 2021; Dawadi, 2021). Islam and Stapa (2021) state that 86% of the students entering private universities are from majority Bangla medium secondary schools where their spoken English is around IELTS band 5, but they have to work in an EMI curriculum from the first day. Teacher agency is similarly limited: Ali and Hamid (2023) talk of teachers who philosophically support communicative approaches, but are limited to teaching to the test. While there has been significant faculty development, including the DFID-funded English in Action program (2008–2017), which reached 51,000 teachers, Karim et al. (2021) report low levels of evidence of lasting change in classroom practice or equitable benefit for rural teachers.

This is an exploratory, qualitative study that answers three research questions.

RQ1. What are the salient and emerging trends in the design of the curriculum, pedagogical practice, and assessment in tertiary-level ELT in Bangladesh?

RQ2. Which multi-level factors (systemic, institutional, pedagogical, and learner-related) are problematic for effective delivery of tertiary English language teaching?

RQ3. What are the policy, structural, faculty development, and pedagogical innovations of the tertiary institutions, and what are the outcomes in terms of student learning and employability that are documented?

The study is based on the synthesis of peer-reviewed empirical studies, policy documents, institutional documents, and grey literature published from January 2010 to December 2025. It does not produce any new primary data, but is based on the existing empirical findings of scholars such as Hamid, Sultana, Roshid, Rahman, and Karim, along with institutional and policy sources to find patterns, contradictions, and gaps. It has three contributions: it offers an integrative and multi-level synthesis of trends and challenges in the bifurcated public–private tertiary sector in Bangladesh; it maps institutional responses and their documented outcomes, which helps to overcome the fragmentation of published evidence; and it identifies research gaps, particularly in the empirical evaluation of OBE implementation and in large-scale mixed-methods study of internationalization effects on teaching, which warrant priority for primary research.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framing

2.1. Historical trajectory of tertiary English language teaching

The National Education Policy (2010) has promoted communicative language teaching (CLT) in schools, and the tertiary education system and the UGC have also reoriented the tertiary accreditation standards towards outcome based in 2016. In the absence of a corresponding change in classroom practice, there has been an explosion of policy documentation, which has been dealt with in various ways by tertiary institutions: in public universities, through mixed-medium teaching; and in private universities, through uneven EMI implementation. The Private University Act 1992 allowed the quick expansion of private universities, and private universities have mostly taken English-medium as an institutional differentiator, whereas public universities are Bangla-dominant (Rahman et al., 2020). This bifurcation is not just a linguistic one. It has allocated access to English capital in an unequal manner in a sector where the National University's collegiate system, which is largely outside the UGC accreditation system detailed here, teaches the vast majority of tertiary students (UGC, 2020).

2.2. Global and regional shifts in tertiary ELT

Internationally, tertiary ELT has undergone a transformation over the past 20 years or so from grammar-translation to communicative and task-based approaches, from ELT as a foreign language to English as a medium of internationalization and research competitiveness, and to disciplinary English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP). These trends have been selectively appropriated in South Asian systems, under neoliberal internationalization logics and employers' demand for graduates who can speak English. Implementation fidelity is constrained by contextual factors such as large classes, gaps in teacher preparation, examination-driven accountability, and limited resources (Sultana & Fang, 2024; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). In Bangladesh, EMI policies are used as an indicator of institutional prestige and international linkage; however, there is a lack of consistency in the implementation of EMI policies: lecturers code-switch heavily to Bangla; thus, the lived classroom is often not EMI at all (Karim et al., 2023). Such changes are not a pedagogical consensus, but rather the governance of education and unequal access to English capital in the context of neoliberalism in South Asia, which has led to the centrality of equity in South Asian tertiary ELT scholarship (Hamid & Rahman, 2019). The ideologies behind the spread of EMI in the Global South have been questioned. Decolonizing EMI involves shifting from the use of English as the only means of communication to pedagogically supported translanguaging that values students' full linguistic repertoires, according to Sah and Fang (2025). In their mixed-methods study in Colombia, Mexico, Iraq, Thailand, and Vietnam, Baker et al. (2025) explore the potential and constraints of Global English and TESOL for equitable language learning. In the case of multilingual education in South Asia, EMI often serves as a reconfiguration of social inequality and fails to democratize English capital, as per Sah (2022). The relevance of decolonial perspectives is particularly relevant in the context of Bangladesh, as 86% of the private-university entrants are from Bangla-medium secondary education (Islam & Stapa, 2021).

2.3. Mapping the existing empirical and policy terrain

There is a considerable peer-reviewed literature on tertiary ELT in Bangladesh, but it is scattered since 2010. There are tensions between policy and practice in relation to CLT and OBE, as well as tensions between prior belief and accountability pressure (Rahman et al., 2019), as documented in curriculum studies and teacher-cognition research, respectively. Washback research on high-stakes public exams shows that there is significant washback, which is manifested in the form of test preparation instead of communicative development (Ali & Hamid, 2020; Ali et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2021). The study on the public–private divide indicates that private universities find it difficult to implement EMI policy on a large scale, and many public universities continue to have Bangla-medium teaching, which results in unequal proficiency. British Council and UGC interventions, such as English in Action (2008-2017), have been assessed with some evidence of limited practice change or benefit to the rural community (Karim et al., 2021). The studies on employability reveal that there is a mismatch between the English language preparation in universities and the communication needs of the workplace, especially in the internationally oriented ready-made garment sector (Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025).

Comparing with the previous reviews helps to understand the contribution of the present review. Macaro et al. (2018) summarized 83 studies on EMI in Higher Education (HE), pinpointing implementation fidelity as the main challenge in resource-poor settings all over the world. This review was of a global nature and did not focus on the specific institutional arrangement of Bangladesh: a split between public and private sector; a Bengali-English ideological split since independence; and a unique institutional arrangement of UGC. The current research fills this gap by bringing together macro-policy, meso-institutional, and micro-classroom evidence in a country-level analytical framework.

This literature is paradoxical in that OBE is both an aspiration and a burden. OBE frameworks are supposed to align learning outcomes, assessment, and pedagogy, but if this is not done in the context of the specific subject, it places an additional burden of compliance on already burdened teaching systems. In June 2020, the UGC sent out an OBE curriculum template to all 151 universities registered at that time (Jasim, 2021), which is based on the current size of the sector at that time and not the current size of the

sector (see Section 1). Milon et al. (2024) and Khan et al. (2023) reveal that the implementation of OBE is still mostly procedural, and faculty members express a lack of training, and assessment systems are not aligned with the stated outcomes. This twofold nature of OBE reform rhetoric and the new burden of implementation must be acknowledged.

The publications that are not peer-reviewed and are produced by institutions and/or organizations are termed grey literature, such as the UGC annual reports, institutional self-assessment reports, and guidelines of the Bangladesh Accreditation Council (BAC), World Bank education sector reviews, and Asian Development Bank policy assessments. These are the sources that provide information at the institutional level, which cannot be found in peer-reviewed journals.

2.4. Identification of the research gap

While each of the empirical domains is well-developed, there is limited systematic research that links trends at the macro level of policy with responses at the meso level of institutions and the micro level of classroom issues. Literature is compartmentalized: curriculum researchers rarely interact with teacher-cognition research; assessment research has tended to focus on the secondary sector and has not been transferred to the tertiary level; employability research does not often mention pedagogical mechanisms; and institutional research does not often consider how policy is or is not enacted in classrooms. There is no comprehensive map of the tertiary ELT landscape across the bifurcated sector, and no comprehensive framework of trends, challenges, and institutional responses. The present study fills this gap.

2.5. Conceptual framework: A multi-level institutional analysis

The study is based on a multi-level approach that combines institutional theory (Scott's 1995 pillars of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive) and critical applied linguistics approaches to language-in-education policy. The regulative pillar involves formal rules and incentive structures that are provided in the national policy: the Education Policy 2010, the Private University Act 1992, and UGC accreditation standards. The normative pillar is made up of professional norms of pedagogical best practice (communicative competence, learner-centeredness) and institutional identity claims (international standing signaled through EMI). The cultural-cognitive pillar includes beliefs that impact teacher thinking and practice, such as beliefs about English (nationalist and neoliberal) and beliefs about teaching (transmission and constructivist) and beliefs about student capability (fixed and developmental).

Trends, challenges and responses are dynamically constituted in the framework at these three levels. National policy trends lead to institutional responses in the form of policy adoption; these responses are then faced with micro-level issues of teacher belief, student attainment, and examination pressure, which then become part of institutional practice and policy interpretation. This architecture is illustrated in Figure 1, where the zone of enactment, where policy is interpreted, adapted, or deflected, and the feedback path, where enacted practice influences subsequent interpretations of policy, are shown. The framework allows for systematic analysis of the reasons for policy intention and classroom reality to be out of alignment, not as an individual teacher problem, but as a predictable systemic problem.

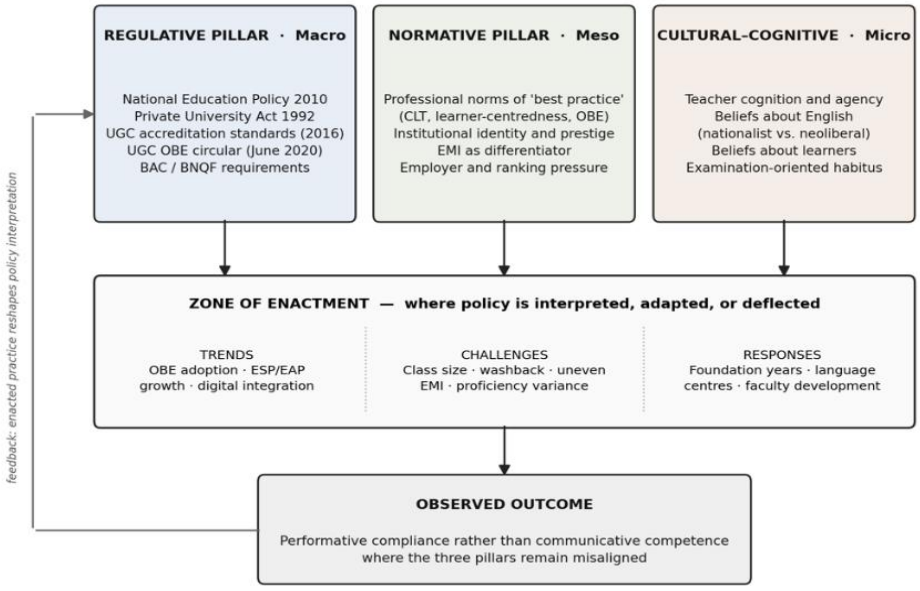


Figure 1. *Multi-level Institutional Framework for Analyzing Tertiary ELT Reform in Bangladesh, Adapted from Scott (1995) and Read through Critical Applied Linguistics*

3. Methodology

This study is an exploratory type of documentary secondary data that is synthesized narratively. The integrative review is the correct term for the study because the study brings together the different types of evidence: empirical studies with varying designs, policy documents, curriculum documents, and quality-assurance documents, to provide an integrated conceptual account instead of an estimate of an effect (Torraco, 2016; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). Synthesis was done in a narrative form and not in a statistical manner as outlined by Popay et al. (2006). The study is an integrative review (narrative synthesis) and is not presented as a systematic review, as it does not involve dual independent screening, dual coding, or formal risk of bias appraisal as proposed by Grant and Booth (2009) in their review typology. The following reporting decisions were guided by Snyder's (2019) guidance on transparency in non-systematic reviews and the SANRA criteria for quality of narrative reviews (Baethge et al., 2019). Document analysis was used as the data-collection technique in this design (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022).

3.1. Research design and analytical framework

Thematic analysis was carried out using the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and was carried out reflexively to ensure the researchers' assumptions and interpretive decisions were kept in mind (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process was iterative that is familiarization, inductive and deductive coding, theme development, and critical synthesis. Reflexive thematic analysis is appropriate for a diverse sample of policy documents, curriculum documents, research reports, and institutional self-evaluations, and can be used to make constant comparisons between the different types of documents to reveal convergence, contradiction, and institutional variation.

3.2. Search strategy, inclusion criteria, and corpus composition

The search was carried out from 12 January to 26 January 2026 in five databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, BanglaJOL, and some websites like UGC, BAC, British Council Bangladesh, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc., and backward citation tracking of the included articles. Search strings were a combination of three concept blocks, with the use of Boolean operators: (a) “English language teaching” OR “ELT” OR “English medium instruction” OR “EMI” OR “EAP” OR “ESP”; (b) tertiary OR university OR “higher education” OR undergraduate; (c) Bangladesh. The eligibility criteria are listed in Table 1, and the selection flow is shown in Figure 2.

Table 1.
Search Parameters and Eligibility Criteria

Parameter	Specification
Databases and sources	Scopus; Web of Science; ERIC; Google Scholar; BanglaJOL; institutional websites (UGC, BAC, British Council Bangladesh, World Bank, Asian Development Bank); backward citation chaining.
Search dates	12–26 January 2026.
Publication window	January 2010 – December 2025.
Language	English-language publications only.
Inclusion criteria	(a) English language; (b) concerned with tertiary-level English language teaching, learning, or assessment in Bangladesh; (c) published within the stated window; (d) empirical research, policy analysis, or institutional documentation.
Exclusion criteria	(a) Opinion pieces and editorials without empirical basis; (b) studies confined to primary or secondary education; (c) items unavailable in full text.
Quality threshold	Peer review for journal articles; recognized institutional provenance for grey literature (UGC, BAC, British Council, World Bank, Asian Development Bank). No further appraisal instrument was applied.
Institutional sampling	Purposive: 12 public and 8 private universities, selected for geographic spread (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Khulna divisions), sectoral representation, and variation in institutional capacity.

Note. Search parameters are reported in accordance with transparency guidance for non-systematic reviews (Baethge et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019). No dual independent screening was undertaken; see Section 3.4.

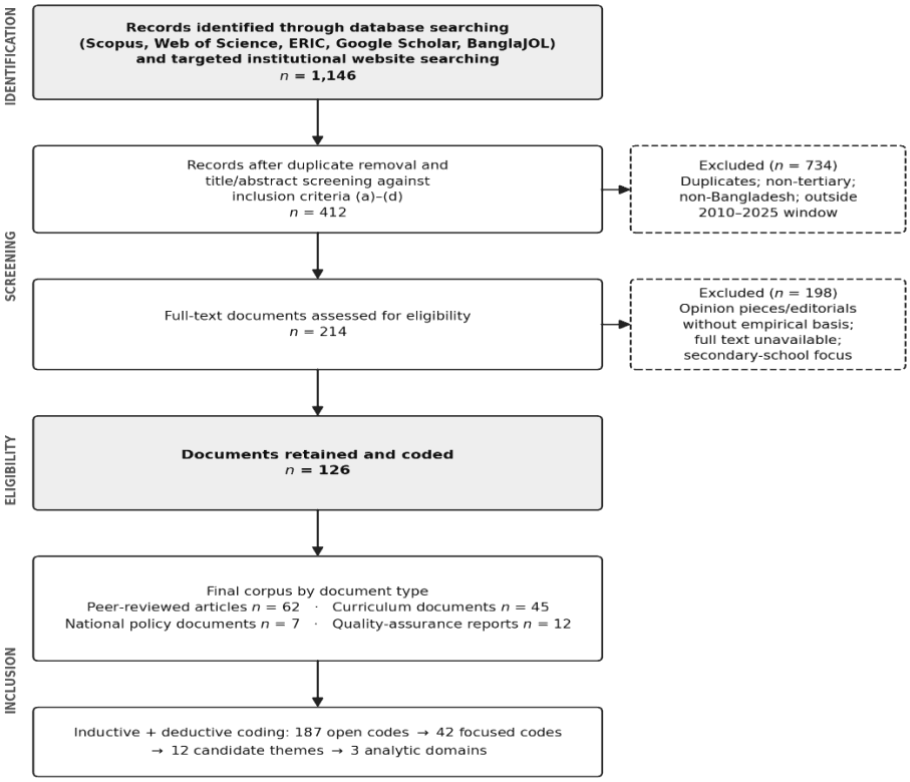


Figure 2. Source Identification, Screening, and Selection Flow for the Review Corpus. The search Was Conducted 12–26 January 2026 for Material Published between January 2010 and December 2025

The statistics in this subsection and in Table 2 refer to the content of the evidence base. They are not empirical findings about English teaching in Bangladesh, but properties of the corpus; substantive findings are reported separately in Section 4. There are 48 (77%) primary empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed), 9 (15%) literature or systematic reviews, and 5 (8%) conceptual/policy analysis papers. Fifty-four (87%) are Bangladesh-specific, and 8 (13%) are regional or comparative with Bangladesh-specific data. By period, 14 (23%) were published between 2010 and 2015, 26 (42%) between 2016 and 2020, and 22 (35%) between 2021 and 2025. Twenty-eight (62%) of the 45 curriculum documents come from private universities, while 17 (38%) come from public universities; this asymmetry is recognized as a limitation, as private universities tend to be more consistent in publishing curriculum documentation.

Table 2.
Composition of the analyzed corpus (descriptive properties of the evidence base, not study findings)

Document type	n	% of corpus	Principal provenance and analytic function
Peer-reviewed articles	62	49.2	Scopus/ERIC-indexed journals; primary evidence on pedagogy, assessment, teacher cognition, and employability.
Curriculum documents	45	35.7	Program handbooks and syllabi from 20 purposively sampled universities; evidence of formal curricular intent.
Quality-assurance reports	12	9.5	Institutional self-assessment and BAC-related review reports; evidence of internal evaluation practice.
National policy documents	7	5.6	Education Policy 2010, Private University Act 1992, UGC accreditation standards, UGC circulars, BNQF; regulative evidence.
Total	126	100.0	—

Note. Percentages are rounded and may not sum exactly to 100. Curriculum documents were retrieved for 11 of 12 sampled public universities (92%) and 7 of 8 sampled private universities (88%); the remaining two institutions supplied publicly available syllabi only.

3.3. Analytical Procedures

The analysis was done in 6 iterative steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Familiarization was done through intensive re-reading of all documents, making preliminary observations and annotations.

Conceptual codes were created through inductive coding, and deductive coding was based on the research questions and the conceptual framework. Initial open coding resulted in 187 codes that were narrowed down to 42 focused codes in three cycles of iterative coding and then clustered into 12 candidate themes and finally three analytic domains that aligned with the research questions. Themes were verified with the entire corpus, developed for internal consistency and external differentiation, and given names. The constant comparison of the different kinds of documents (policy statement and curriculum enactment) and the institutional claims and empirical findings revealed both alignment and contradiction. Silences were recognized as being analytically significant, in particular the lack of student voice in institutional self-evaluations.

3.4. Quality safeguards and methodological limitations

To achieve trustworthiness, triangulation of source types, transparent documentation of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and reflexive attention to the secondary nature of the evidence were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). A coding trail was maintained to document coding decisions, theme development, and interpretive decisions. Grey literature was intentionally selected to counter publication bias, as it often provides information on implementation gaps that are not reported in peer-reviewed articles on success. Purposive sampling was used to address unequal institutional documentation; both high-capacity and resource-constrained institutions were sampled.

The design has three methodological limitations, which are clearly stated. Firstly, the screening, coding, and theme development were done by one researcher, with no second coder, and no inter-rater reliability was applied. While the single-coder bias is reduced by a reflexive journal documenting coding decisions, interpretive uncertainties, and alternative readings, the findings are not intersubjectively verified, but rather one defensible interpretation. Secondly, no formal risk-of-bias or study-quality appraisal instrument was used other than the peer-review and institutional-provenance thresholds in Table 1, and the corpus is thus heterogeneous in methodological rigor. Third, the search was limited to English-language sources, and this will have missed out on Bangla-language scholarship and policy discussion on the nationalist aspect of the debate. Because of these, the study is not a systematic review, and the claims are not exhaustive evidence mapping but instead are an interpretive synthesis.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The study was a secondary analysis of documentary sources, which did not involve human participants, and thus did not need ethics review. Reflexive awareness of the ethical boundaries of secondary analysis is still applicable, however: the data were not originally created for the research questions, and the questions may not fit exactly with the context and intent of the original document creators (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). The voices of stakeholders (students and teachers) are only captured as mediated by existing research, and the lived experience is therefore also lost in the mediation. There is also an asymmetry between the availability of private-university materials vs. public-university materials, as private-university materials are often proprietary and less accessible than public-university materials. This design is therefore not able to answer a number of questions: what do students think about the effectiveness of OBE-reformed curricula; what are the differences between successful and unsuccessful enactments of EMI; what are the differences between ELT delivery quality in rural and urban institutions; and what are the career trajectories of different institutional models? These are the priorities for primary research.

4. Results

The results presented below are related to English language teaching in Bangladesh. They are distinct from the corpus statistics given in Section 3, which are about the evidence base and not the phenomenon.

4.1. Emerging trends in tertiary ELT curriculum and pedagogy

The synthesis reveals three trends in the curriculum. First, the formal adoption of OBE frameworks picked up pace following the revision of the accreditation standards by the UGC in 2016 that mandated learning outcomes in relation to disciplinary and generic competencies (Islam et al., 2021). In June 2020, the UGC shared an OBE curriculum template with all 151 Universities at that time (Jasim, 2021). In early 2021, the senior officials of the university realized that the OBE syllabi were not fully implemented throughout the university (Jasim, 2021). Later case studies show that the progress in adopting OBE has been more procedural, such as the documentation of the curriculum and the mapping of learning outcomes, and that the best evidence of OBE enactment is found in engineering and business programs as opposed to language programs (Khan et al., 2023; Milon et al., 2024).

Secondly, the provision of ESP and EAP has been steadily growing, especially at the foundation year level and in private universities. In response to the demands of employers, private institutions have launched discipline-specific English courses in business, engineering and healthcare (Roshid & Chowdhury, 2013). Third, digital integration and blended learning are institutionally prescribed and pedagogically variable. While policy documents in both sectors highlight online and blended provision

after the disruption of COVID-19 (2020-2021), observational and qualitative evidence shows that there is still limited faculty digital literacy, limited infrastructure in resource-poor public universities, and that the focus is still on content delivery and not interactive online learning.

Employers' feedback and ranking pressure have resulted in a significant change in the private-university English curricula in the direction of soft skills and employability. Studies on the employer side find that graduates' communication in English is not aligned with the needs of the workplace, as their proficiency is always lower than what is expected by employers (Hasan et al., 2024; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025). Instead of grammar and literature exams, oral presentations, workplace communication, and professional writing are being used more and more to measure student achievement. There is a significant increase in the number of foundation-year and pre-degree English programmes in private universities to address entry-proficiency ceilings, and Islam and Stapa (2021) report that 86% of the entrants at the university they studied had an average IELTS band 5 and were from Bangla-medium secondary schools. That is based on one institution only and is consistent with national entry-proficiency trends elsewhere, but could be replicated across institutions to significantly increase the evidence base.

4.2. Multi-level challenges constraining effective delivery

Systemic-level structural constraints are relatively independent of policy change. Communicative pedagogy and individual feedback are limited due to class size. In 2018, the tertiary pupil–teacher ratio in Bangladesh was 37:1, one of the highest in South Asia for countries that have more recent data, compared to 33:1 in Pakistan, 30:1 in Sri Lanka, and 25:1 in India in 2018 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). Research at the institutional level reveals that the classes of language teachers vary in size from 45 students to 91 students (Bashir & Ferdousy, 2006; Chowdhury & Shaila, 2013), and public-university graduates point out overcrowding as one of the major challenges of communicative ELT (Haque, 2022). There are still significant differences between the resources available for language provision in private universities and those available for language provision in public universities: private universities invest in their faculty, language facilities, and technology, while public universities have limited recurrent funding for language provision, outdated curricula, and little ongoing professional development. The negative washback of the high-stakes examination culture of the Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary Certificate is transferred to tertiary study where students come with an examination performance and grammatical correctness orientation, instrumental instead of integrative motivation (Ali & Hamid, 2020; Ali et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021).

Institutional level: EMI policies in private universities still have difficulties in implementation. In a discourse analysis of the attitudes of senior teachers from different institutions, Karim et al. (2023) discovered that the respondents reported that they regularly resorted to Bangla for complex explanations and to prepare students for examinations. The quality-assurance processes of language programmes are still not well developed: programme review is required by UGC accreditation standards, but the assessment of learning outcomes and teaching quality is often not evidence-based, and student feedback is tokenistic. Faculty development has grown, but the English in Action programme (2008–2017) involved 51,000 teachers and resulted in limited transfer to classroom practice; Karim et al. (2021) found that 12 months after the programme, teachers were continuing to teach in a transmission manner, while their confidence and awareness of communicative approaches had increased. Pedagogically, content transmission continues to be the case even though policy discourse is in favor of communicative competence. Even teachers who are philosophically aligned with CLT continue to face a heavy workload in preparing for exams, lack of oral activities in crowded classrooms, reliance on print materials, and teacher-centered grammar explanations, as found by Ali and Hamid (2023). The study of translanguaging in the context of Bangladeshi tertiary classrooms challenges the notion that code-switching is a policy violation and that it is pedagogically unproductive, as it helps students comprehend, be learner-centered, and gain access to concepts in content-based teaching (Rafi & Morgan, 2022, 2024; Saha & Rahman, 2022; Sultana & Fang, 2024). This evidence indicates that in multilingual, resource-poor environments, high demands for EMI can have a negative impact. At the learner level, there is a wide range of spoken competence due to the uneven preparation of the learners in school. Islam and Stapa (2021) discovered that the entrants to private universities ranged from IELTS band 3 to 5 and were expected to be able to function from the first day in EMI. The Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCA) and qualitative analysis of language anxiety further limit students' oral participation and promote passivity (Al Mamun, 2021; Yasmin et al., 2025). The fear of speaking, especially, is a form of anxiety, which is particularly significant; Yasmin et al (2025) determine that the fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension are the two main sources of speaking anxiety among university students.

4.3. Institutional responses and their documented outcomes

There have been a variety of policy and structural

responses from institutions, some of which have been documented to have an impact. Private universities have been at the forefront of curriculum redesign, which incorporates explicit learning outcomes, foundation-year English for students with lower proficiency levels (usually 6-12 months of intensive English courses) and the creation of a language center for disciplinary English and general English. Public universities, with budget and decentralized governance, have progressed at a slower pace, but senior management are now more inclined to accept mixed-medium teaching, with a greater proportion of English and less first language support. There are now 12 main private and 8 public universities with institution-wide language centers coordinating the provision of English, setting up learning-resource centers, and performing more and more as a link with external testing bodies.

Some universities have developed writing centers based on the North American model to give feedback on academic writing, with little documentation of sustainability and evaluation of student outcomes. There are also indications that the quality of feedback itself is also dependent on the experience of the instructors: Alam (2025) compared the written corrective feedback beliefs and practices of novice and experienced EAP instructors in Bangladesh and found systematic differences between the groups, suggesting that the effectiveness of a writing center is not merely a function of its existence but also of the material conditions of its staffing and training. Faculty development programs have mushroomed, some of which have been financed from outside, such as the British Council English in Action program, the World Bank teacher training program and bilateral schemes which have trained several thousand tertiary English teachers. In most cases, however, it is a voluntary process and assessment is more of a satisfaction than an outcomes approach.

International partnerships have grown, especially in the private university sector, leading to student mobility, joint degrees and visiting faculty and exerting indirect pressure on the use of English as the language of instruction and assessment. The BAC has made systematic documentation of learning outcomes and program review compulsory since 2017 and has been encouraging these activities, but implementation and follow-up are not consistent. The use of technology has grown in all LMS, CALD, and online assessment tools, and positive attitudes of students have been reported in tertiary education contexts, while access and digital literacy remain issues (Chandha & Chowdury, 2023; Paul, 2020).

5. Discussion

The synthesis suggests that higher education systems in Bangladesh, as well as in other South Asian and Global South countries, are characterized by high policy ambition, genuine structural innovation, and ongoing policy implementation gaps all features of tertiary ELT in Bangladesh.

5.1. Policy aspiration and implementation reality

The extent to which policy and practice are misaligned and largely predictable in Bangladesh is a significant influence on the nature of tertiary ELT in the country. The adoption of CLT, OBE and learner-centered pedagogy is included in both national and institutional documents, and is in line with international best-practice models. The evidence from classroom-level studies, aggregated from 62 peer-reviewed studies and institutional assessments, suggests otherwise. The examination requirements continue to influence teaching; grammar is still taught, not practiced, and communicative activity is still limited.

This is not a unique phenomenon of Bangladesh. According to Kaplan et al. (2011), language-in-education policy is ineffective when there is a mismatch between policy intention and resource constraints, teacher belief and pedagogical change, and accountability systems and pedagogical change. Bangladesh is a case in point. Although outcome-based accreditation was implemented in 2016, Ali and Hamid (2023) discover that teachers with a philosophical stance towards communicative approaches are still test-oriented, as there is no reward for pedagogical innovation in the examination system and institutional incentive structures. The significance of the implication is great. Policy borrowing, the unselective adoption of international language-in-education frameworks, can set up unrealistic expectations for institutions, which may lead to what Chowdhury and Kabir (2014) refer to as "language wars" between the nationalist agenda and the marketization of English.

5.2. Regional positioning and comparative insight

The problems faced in Bangladesh are not unique and isolated; rather, they are a part of the general trend of internationalization of higher education and EMI diffusion in South and Southeast Asia. Implementation fidelity is the main issue in EMI contexts with limited resources, according to Macaro et al. (2018). A survey of 632 English teachers in 31 provinces in Indonesia by Mufanti et al. (2024) revealed that 76% of the teachers said that they were confident in their understanding of OBE, and 41% could explain the relationship between outcomes and assessment, which was similar to the Bangladeshi pattern of adopting OBE without embedding. Hamid and Sultana (2024) state that the public–private duality that exists in Bangladesh is also found in Malaysia and Thailand, where private universities use EMI as a differentiation strategy and public universities provide mixed-medium provision due to a lack of resources. However, the situation in Bangladesh is unique in terms of entry requirements,

as 86% of the entrants to private universities are from Bangla-medium schools, with an average IELTS band of 5 (Islam & Stapa, 2021), which is far below the level that day-one EMI assumes.

The closest comparator for Malaysia is available. In 2021, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was aligned to the CEFR and is one of the national proficiency benchmarking tests cited as an example (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). There is sobering evidence on its impact on the labour market. Kamlun et al. (2020) analyzed the responses of 8,995 respondents to the national Graduate Tracer Study and found that MUET results were only indirectly related to graduate employability, which is prior to the realignment of MUET with the CEFR and hence relates to benchmarking in general, rather than to CEFR alignment specifically. On this evidence, standardized benchmarking is not enough on its own, and needs to be accompanied by curriculum and labor-market alignment. The same is true at the national level: Vietnam has set the exit level for non-specialist graduates at CEFR B2 and at CEFR C1 for English majors (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2008) but in a self-assessment, the Ministry of Education and Training has admitted that less than one-fifth of graduates achieve the desired level (Vietnam News, 2018). The assessment lesson is provided by Sri Lanka. Wall and Alderson's (1993) impact study of examination reform showed that the changes in the way teachers teach as a result of changing a test are more easily achieved than the changes in the content of what is taught, and that the pedagogical effects of a test change are not necessarily automatic; this was confirmed and extended by Wall (2005), and the underlying washback hypotheses were presented by Alderson and Wall (1993). All these comparisons suggest that assessment reform and curriculum reform should not be done one after the other but simultaneously if the CEFR benchmarking is implemented in Bangladesh. The comparative evidence is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3.
Comparative regional evidence on tertiary ELT policy instruments and documented outcomes

Context	Policy instrument	Documented outcome	Implication for Bangladesh
Malaysia	MUET; CEFR realignment (2021); Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015)	Tracer study of 8,995 graduates found limited direct effect of proficiency test results on employability (Kamlun et al., 2020)	Benchmarking alone does not close the employability gap; curriculum and labour-market alignment must accompany it
Vietnam	National Foreign Language Project 2020: CEFR B2 exit for non-majors, C1 for majors (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2008)	Ministry review reported fewer than 20% of graduates reaching the target level (Vietnam News, 2018)	Exit benchmarks require adequate contact hours, teacher capacity, and assessment infrastructure
Indonesia	National adoption of outcome-based education in higher education	Of 632 teachers surveyed, 76% reported understanding OBE but only 41% could link outcomes to assessment (Mufanti et al., 2024)	Procedural adoption without assessment literacy reproduces the Bangladeshi pattern
Sri Lanka	High-stakes examination reform intended to drive communicative pedagogy	Test change altered content taught more than methods used (Wall & Alderson, 1993; Wall, 2005)	Assessment reform must be paired with pedagogical support, not substituted for it
Global (EMI)	EMI expansion in higher education across 83 studies	Implementation fidelity is the dominant constraint in resource-poor settings (Macaro et al., 2018)	Bangladesh's bifurcated sector intensifies a generalized fidelity problem

Note. Comparative cases were selected for structural similarity to Bangladesh in sector composition, policy instrument, or evidentiary lesson; the table synthesizes published evidence and does not report data generated by the present study.

5.3. Theoretical contribution: Multi-level institutional dynamics

This synthesis adds to theories of how language-in-education policies are implemented by rethinking the policy–practice gap as a result of a lack of alignment between Scott's (1995) three pillars of institutions. National policy is at the regulative level and is in the form of a rule. Pedagogical best practice and institutional internationalization are at the normative level and are the professional ideologies. Cultural-cognitive beliefs about language, teaching, and learners are deeply held beliefs that will influence what is enacted. These three pillars are not in sync in the case of Bangladesh. There is a disconnect between policy, which calls for communicative and outcome-based practice; professional norms, which uphold communicative and outcome-based practice; and incentive structures and assessment regimes, which reward examination performance. Where the pillars have differences, classroom practice goes towards what is most immediately incentivized. The framework thus clarifies the reasons for the limited and non-sustaining change at a single level of intervention. Karim et al. (2021) make exactly this

point about English in Action: the problem was not the ability of the teachers, but the lack of an incentive system to change to one that rewards communicative teaching. This is what is shown in Figure 1. The zone of enactment takes up the regulative pressure and gives back per formative compliance.

5.4. Practical and policy implications

Before moving on to implications, it is important to note what the corpus does not say, as this can also be informative. There are no studies that are specifically in the context of tertiary language programs that measure implementation fidelity for OBE; the available evidence from Bangladesh is in engineering and business faculties, where transfer cannot be assumed. There was no controlled or longitudinal assessment of foundation-year programs, writing centers, or language centers was identified, and claims of effectiveness are based on institutional self-report. There is virtually no student voice in the quality-assurance documents analyzed, and rural and regional institutions are significantly under-represented in comparison to metropolitan institutions. The limitations of these gaps limit the conclusions that can be drawn and guide the research agenda presented in Section 6.3.

Three implications follow. First, policy adaptation needs to focus on contextual embedding: outcome-based frameworks that are based on international templates need to be sufficiently adapted to the context to be able to deal with examination-led accountability and resource constraints. Embedding on the Malaysian precedent means there is a long-term commitment, multi-stakeholder consultation, and piloting for three to five years. Second, there needs to be feedback loops in institutional responses. There are encouraging signs in writing centers, language centers, and foundation-year programs, but more needs to be done to evaluate these programs over time to warrant further investment. Third, the employability gap is not resolved by the amount of English provision in the curriculum, as seen in the institution-wide English provision (Hasan et al., 2024; Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2025), which suggests that merely adding more English to the curriculum is not enough to resolve the skills mismatch.

6. Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusion

6.1. Policy-level recommendations

The benchmarks below (CEFR levels, IELTS and TOEFL thresholds, and staffing ratios) are proposed targets, based on comparative international practice and published descriptor and concordance frameworks. They are not empirical data obtained in the current research, which did not provide any proficiency or staffing data, but only analyzed the documentary sources. Each benchmark is listed as to where the evidence is found, as shown in Table 4, to help readers differentiate evidence from proposal. The relationship between scores and CEFR is approximate group-level equivalences, and the test providers themselves caution against using it as equivalences (Council of Europe, 2020; Educational Testing Service, 2025).

Table 4.
Sequenced Policy Recommendations with Explicit Provenance of Each Proposed Benchmark

Horizon	Recommendation	Proposed benchmark	Provenance of the benchmark
Years 1–2	UGC to embed an explicit, measurable English language and communication outcome within OBE accreditation standards	CEFR B1–B2 for English for Academic Purposes at programme exit	Proposed target. Adapted from Vietnam's national B2 exit standard (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2008) and CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020). Not derived from study data.
Years 1–2	Verification through internal portfolio assessment with an optional external benchmark and a publicly funded bridging course for students below threshold	IELTS Academic ≥ 6.0 or TOEFL iBT ≥ 80 as indicative B2 markers	Proposed target. Based on provider concordance frameworks, which treat these as approximate group-level alignments (Council of Europe, 2020; Educational Testing Service, 2025). Not derived from study data.
Years 2–3	Ministry of Education and UGC to formalize a tertiary EMI policy permitting pedagogically supported translanguaging and bilingual delivery	Bilingual delivery recognized as compliant rather than deficient	Evidence-based. Grounded in Bangladeshi classroom research (Rafi & Morgan, 2022, 2024; Saha & Rahman, 2022; Sultana & Fang, 2024) and decolonial EMI scholarship (Sah & Fang, 2025).
Years 2–3	Institutional staffing standard for communicative language provision, funded from recurrent budgets	Indicative maximum of 25–30 students per language section; 0.5–1.0 FTE employer-liaison coordinator per institution	Proposed target. Extrapolated from professional class-size guidance for English teaching (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014) against a documented national ratio of 37:1 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024) and observed sections of 45–91 students. Not an empirically validated optimum.
Years 3–5	National exit benchmarking as a soft graduation requirement with strong equity monitoring, coupled with assessment redesign	CEFR B1–B2 at exit; summative assessment to include listening and speaking with published rubrics	Proposed target, conditioned by comparative evidence that benchmarking alone has limited employability effect (Kamlun et al., 2020) and that test change alone does not shift pedagogy (Wall & Alderson, 1993; Wall, 2005).

Note. "Proposed target" indicates a benchmark advanced by the authors on the basis of comparative practice; "evidence-based" indicates a

recommendation supported by empirical findings within the reviewed corpus.

There are two cautions in implementing these recommendations. It is important that bridging provision is publicly funded, not privatized, or else it will exacerbate the regional and sectoral inequities. The formalization of translanguaging is politically charged and could face nationalist opposition to the priority of the Bengali language and opposition from the private sector to EMI as a status symbol. Implementation thus must have a messaging plan that makes clear that translanguaging is additive; that principled use of the first language is a way to develop English.

6.2. Institutional-level recommendations

The current cascade and one-off workshop model of university language centres and faculty development units should be replaced by ongoing, department-based continuing professional development, with mentoring, peer observation, reflective practice and monitoring. The funding for such provision should be from institutional recurrent budgets, and not from external donor projects, to ensure that it lasts beyond the project cycle, the main structural weakness of the English in Action model. Employer partnerships need to be formalized and monitored in terms of outcomes via industry-led co-design of curricula, formalized internships, industry advisory boards and specific career centres. This will involve investment in administrative capacity which can be co-funded by industry partners who gain the benefit of having pipelines of graduate talent, and research collaboration. Employers should also be encouraged to seek out intentional hires from public and regional universities, instead of focusing on hiring at private universities in the metro area.

Based on the gaps identified, there are four priorities. Firstly, and most policy-relevant, large-scale mixed-methods research on the fidelity of OBE implementation and its impact in the classroom in tertiary English courses in both sectors. Secondly, controlled impact testing of writing centres, language centres and foundation-year programmes using validated writing and speaking tests, to determine if it is worth investing in these institutions. Third, ethnographic and discourse-analytic studies of the pedagogical role of translanguaging and of learners' experiences of translanguaging in nominally English-only classrooms. Fourth, longitudinal cohort studies which follow graduates' attainment, employment and employer satisfaction from the public to the private and vice versa.

Tertiary-level English language teaching in Bangladesh is at a critical point. The public–private split, based on conflicting visions of nationalistic multilingualism and neoliberal internationalization, remains an unequal provider of access to English capital and an unequal threat to equitable employability of graduates. The main question remains the same: How to get from policy intention to classroom reality in the face of a growing number of policy documents and institutional structures? The policy–practice gap is not a fault of individual institutions or teachers but is the inevitable result of a lack of fit between the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive dimensions, as revealed in this synthesis. As long as assessment, teacher development systems, and institutional incentives are aligned, there will be performative compliance and not communicative competence.

To achieve the desired outcomes of tertiary English education, which are equal access to global knowledge and to employment, it is necessary to coordinate and implement evidence-based reform at policy, institutional, and pedagogical levels. The sequenced recommendations listed above are realistic, leverage existing infrastructure (UGC, BAC, and the Bangladesh National Qualifications Framework), are models that have been tested elsewhere, and are based on existing domestic partnerships. This will take political will and a commitment of domestic resources, and careful monitoring and assessment of results. Coherent institutional action is still possible, and if it is not taken, then Bangladesh will be in danger of creating a knowledge divide based on differential access to English.

Declarations

Authors' contributions

The single author performed all the tasks.

Availability of data and materials

Only secondary and documentary sources were used in this study, and they were all public. No new data were collected or analyzed. All peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and institutional reports referenced are publicly available via the sources cited in the reference list, and the coding framework and search log are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical consideration

No ethics approval or consent to participate was needed. The study did not include any human subjects, personal data, or animals, but only used publicly available documents. Authors' contributions:

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No competing interests.

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Use of generative artificial intelligence

The author used generative AI-assisted tools for language editing, reference formatting, and improving readability in preparing this manuscript. Data were not generated, and the search, coding of the corpus, interpretation of findings, and substantive analytical content were not done by an AI tool.

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