Opportunities and Challenges in Teaching ESP in Private Universities of Bangladesh

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Abstract: With new television channels, media firms, and telecoms coming out in Bangladesh every day, there is now, more than ever, a need for graduates who possess competent communication and language skills. Students' future prospects are increasingly becoming contingent not only upon academic success at the tertiary level but also upon their level of English proficiency.

However, it is a matter of concern that even though the demand is there, the majority of the graduates produced every year, fail to fulfil the needs of employers. It is clear that the gap between what is required and what is taught must be addressed.

In fact, in order to bridge this ever widening gap, many major national and multinational companies, banks, NGO's, telecom's and software companies have been conducting their own in-house language training programmes (e.g. HSBC, BRAC Bank, Robi, Hotel Sonargao etc) for quite some time now. They focus on their immediate needs for English without wasting time and effort on teaching irrelevant elements.

This paper will focus on the limitations of General English language courses designed for students of diverse disciplines in private universities in Bangladesh, and examine whether introducing ESP courses would be more effective in raising the proficiency level of the students and at the same time meet the needs of both students as well as prospective employers.

"I don't really see why my students even need any of these foundation courses (in English)!", one of our senior colleagues from the Computer Science department at BRAC University once remarked. Even though it might come as shock to hear a university teacher say something like that, unfortunately it echoes the thoughts of many people in the teaching community. This particular teacher's grievance was that his star student, who had won prizes in international programming competitions, both at home and abroad, would not be able to graduate on time because he would have to re-take an English language course he had previously failed and because even when/if the said student did pass he could hardly be expected to get a grade which would allow him to maintain his high GPA. "I mean it's not as if he's learning anything in these courses that will actually help him when he becomes a professional programmer..." the aggrieved teacher added.

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Harsh as they may sound, these statements are not something that as English language teachers we can afford to simply shrug off anymore. Almost all of us who teach or have taught English language courses in universities in Bangladesh will probably agree that very few students are actually able to apply the English language skills they are being taught to their chosen disciplines and beyond. Every private university in Bangladesh offers mandatory English language courses, not only to make our students more proficient in English but also to meet the specific needs of students of various disciplines, however, it is time to seriously ask ourselves as teachers, of the effectiveness of the language courses we teach and whether they actually meet those needs. This paper will focus on the limitations of General English language courses designed for students of diverse disciplines in private universities in Bangladesh, and examine whether introducing ESP courses would be more effective in raising the proficiency level of the students and at the same time meet needs of the students as well.

Background

Generally all private university students in Bangladesh need to complete at least two semesters of English language courses. Most universities offer a non-credit foundation/remedial course in the first semester while more advanced credit courses, such as English Composition, Academic Writing, English communication skills, and Public Speaking are offered on completion of the first semester. Though the non-credit courses focus on General English, the credit courses, based on their content, usually focus on Reading and Writing. Many teachers, however, are sceptical of the effectiveness of these courses since the proficiency level of most of the students taking these courses could not be more than at the Pre-intermediate stage at best and there is very little possibility of their being able to apply the language skills acquired to their own disciplines.

The quality and effectiveness of the training offered to students aspiring to study in English medium universities is obviously a matter of great concern to those involved in English Language Teaching. This is because critical decisions concerning students' careers and therefore their future prospects are increasingly becoming contingent not only upon academic success at the tertiary level but also upon their level of English proficiency. We as English language instructors, therefore, carry considerable responsibility for ensuring that learners are placed in the best possible positions to cope with the challenges of academic study.

Most private universities in Bangladesh offer two to four language courses throughout an undergraduate students' period of study, some of which are optional courses. Apart from the non-credit-courses, which are more remedial in nature, other English courses are basically the same as academic reading and writing courses taught worldwide; indeed most of them are modelled on courses taught in foreign universities. These courses focus on techniques for effective reading, summarizing, writing reports and essays etc.

However, what seems to be lacking in most courses is a focus on developing students study skills which is of prime importance, since what students need first and foremost are the study skills required to cope with the huge volume of reading and writing they face on arrival in an English medium environment. The study of short texts followed by basic comprehension questions will in no way equip them with the ability to interpret, digest, synthesize and evaluate the quantity of material that faces them. Moreover, we cannot lose sight of the fact that all of the textbooks our students have to study are written with an at least an upper intermediate level audience in mind.

Though it cannot be denied that one of the main reasons for this inability is their lack of proficiency in the language (most students are at the elementary level or pre-intermediate level at the time of admission), it is also equally true that the problems students face are not only lack of proficiency but also problems related with study skills, inadequate learner training, inappropriate strategies for study (especially in critical listening, reading and writing skills) along with the culture of teacher dependence prevalent among Bangladeshi students.

Our main priorities should be to get our students to a level where they can comfortably apply their English language skills to academic studies, as well as be able to apply those same skills effectively and competently when they enter their chosen professions.

Having said that, the obvious question arises, where are our students now, in terms of proficiency?

If we take look at the Common European Framework we find that learners have been divided into three broad divisions which can again be divided into six levels:

A Basic Speaker

A1 Breakthrough or beginner

A2 Waystage or elementary

B Independent Speaker

B1 Threshold or pre-intermediate

B2 Vantage or intermediate

C Proficient Speaker

C1 Effective Operational Proficiency or upper intermediate

C2 Mastery or advanced

The CEFR below describes what a learner is supposed to be able to do in reading, listening, speaking and writing at each level.

level	description
A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in the most complex situations.

Based on the CFER it is evident that the majority of students entering Bangladeshi private universities are at not even at the pre-intermediate level (B1).

Because even after twelve years of English courses at the secondary and higher secondary level our students are still mostly at the elementary level, it would be unrealistic to expect them to attain a level of proficiency acceptable at the university level in a matter of two semesters or seven to eight months. Universities abroad do not have to face this particular problem since they have strict guidelines regarding admission, which do not accept students who have not demonstrated an acceptable level of proficiency through international English language tests such as IELTS or TOEFL. However, since most universities in Bangladesh are not yet at a stage where they can afford to pick and choose, the problem remains unchanged. Because there is such a major discrepancy between the needs of the learners and the needs of their respective disciplines, the effectiveness of these courses are being severely hampered.

Interviews of English language teachers from the University of Dhaka, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, Prime University and BRAC University revealed that regarding the effectiveness of the General English courses, most were of the opinion that the existing courses follow the conventionally established methodology of imparting Speaking, Reading, Listening and Writing skills to the students. However, what is missing is an understanding of the particular needs of our students, and more importantly, ways to address those needs over the course of two to three semesters. The general feeling was that students tend to perceive English courses as separate from and outside of their major area. Students also view these courses as an obstacle to be overcome rather than as a necessary course, an obstacle which only contributed towards bringing down their CGPA.

To get a very general impression of student's attitudes towards to English courses taught in their first year of studies, fifty students of three different private universities in Bangladesh were asked to answer to two yes/no questions:

Q1. Were you able to apply the skills learnt in English to your major discipline?

Q2. Should English courses use materials more relevant to their major discipline?
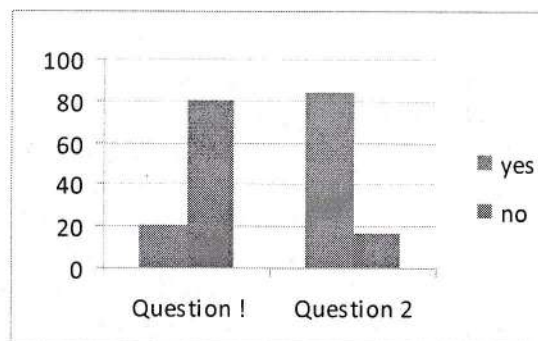

Figure 1

As we can see from the figure above 80% of the students felt that they were not able to apply the skills learnt in their English courses to their major disciplines; while in response to the second question 84% felt that material more relevant to their relevant disciplines should be used. Though this data is in no way conclusive, it does serve to give us a picture of students' perception of the general English courses that are offered.

Interviewed teachers also mentioned time as a major factor in ensuring the effectiveness of the English courses and that since most universities do not offer English courses after the first year, students have three years to forget the skills that they may have learnt, simply because they are not applied to their majors.

While most courses did include techniques for various types of writing such as descriptive, narrative, comparison/contrast, process analysis, and argumentative, they were usually taught at a very basic level due to time constraints. Courses were also crammed with unnecessary items such as resume and cover letter writing in their very first year, whereas a student would actually benefit more from them at the pre-departure stage, especially in a country like Bangladesh where the notion of students working and studying at the same time is still an alien concept. Again the level of proficiency of the students at the tertiary level, or rather the lack of it, coupled with the amount of time and effort that has to be put into*"re-learning"* makes it all the more difficult to teach within such a limited time frame.

One of the major complaints of teachers of English is that even after twelve years of English language learning, the low level of proficiency of most of the students entering private universities, coupled with the fact that English is not used outside the class (or even inside sometimes ...) have rendered most English language courses totally ineffective. Obviously this is true to a great extent, which is why, there is now probably a need, greater than ever before, why English language courses need to examined and see if they can be made more relevant to students' needs.

Why ESP?

In any non-English speaking country, students come to university not only with different levels of language competence but also different needs, in terms of language usage. The English language skills an engineering student requires is not necessarily the same as that of a student studying BBA, Law or Medicine. According to Hutchinson and Waters 1987, General English Course are assumed to be non-specific in terms of the language needs of the student compared to what they will be required to make use of in specific target situations. Indeed, instructors of other disciplines have often remarked that their students do not need the General English courses that are being taught as they do not benefit

them when they enter their chosen professions. It is obvious, therefore same to assume, that students require specific English language skills.

Before going any further it is necessary to examine what constitutes an English for Specific Purposes course.

Though In the 60's it was associated with the notion of a special language and with an important subfield of English for science and technology (EST), ESP is in fact a rather general term with two distinct categories : English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), with various academic disciplines falling under EAP such as Business, Science and Technology, Medicine, and the Law.

Similarly, EOP can be subdivided into English for Professional Purposes (EPP) and English for Vocational Purposes with English for Business Purposes (EBP) falling under EPP.

A further subdivision of EBP: English for General Business Purposes (EGBP) and English for Specific Business Purposes (ESBP) have been suggested by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), where EGBP courses are for "pre-experience learners or those at the very early stages of their career" (p. 55). In contrast, ESBP courses are aimed at "job experienced learners who bring business knowledge and skills to the language learning situation" (p. 56).

This distinction is worth noting because at present in Bangladesh, almost every university that offers an MBA programme has a Business English course, however in most cases the students are a mixture of professionals and fresh graduates who have little or no job experience. Most of these courses are remedial and generic in nature and are rarely effective because they fail to meet the needs of the students. Any course designed with only professionals or only fresh graduates in mind cannot help but fail when taught to the other, especially since the fundamental principle of ESP is that it "is based on a close analysis of the learner's needs" (Strevens ,1980). When it comes to professionals, we must bear in mind that they do not want to be transported back in time to a typical classroom.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a needs based concept to determine which language skills should be profitably developed for academic and professional success of students. It takes into account certain basic questions like: "who the learners are, what their linguistic background or level of competence is, what their view to language learning is, what their purpose and expectations are, what particular skill they will need in their actual, on- the- job situation etc." (R.K.Singh ,2005)

Learners have an opportunity to acquire English naturally because it is integrated into a subject matter important to them, working with language in a context they understand and find interesting.

Strevens (1988) defines the absolute characteristics of ESP as follows:

- Designed to meet the specific needs of the learner
- Related in content (Themes and Topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities
- Centred on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis discourse and semantics
- In contrast with general English

Dudley-Evans (1997) on the other hand defines ESP as having the following Absolute Characteristics, which are

1. ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners

2. ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves

3. ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre. However ESP can also display these Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines

2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English

3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level

4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.

5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems

It is evident from the definition, that ESP can but is not necessarily concerned with a specific discipline, nor does it have to be aimed at a certain age group or ability range. ESP should be seen as an 'approach' to teaching, or what Hutchinson (1987:19) states as, "... an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning".

Needs Analysis

According to Strevens (1980) "ESP entails the provision of English language instruction (i) devised to meet the learner's particular needs; (ii) related in themes and topics to designated occupations or areas of study; (iii) selective (i.e. 'not general') as to language content; (iv) where indicated, restricted as to the language 'skills' included".

There are five analytical stages for determining a particular ESP requirement and designing a suitable course to meet that requirement. (Strevens 1980)

Stage One :

A needs analysis, based on information provided by the learners, sponsors or clients, and other interested parties.

Stage Two :

A content analysis, based on the field or discipline in question.

Stage Three :

The instructor determines whether the training needs fall under the EAP or the EOP side of the ESP umbrella.

Stage Four :

Determining whether the training will precede, follow, or be concurrent with content Specific training (regarding Stage 4, Strevens notes that ESP learners who are already established in their professions are likely to be more motivated, mature, and demanding).

Stage Five :

The instructor prepares a targeted syllabus and appropriate training materials.

Strevens (1980) also goes on to say that because time and effort are focused exclusively on learners' needs; mastery of the target material takes less time. At the same time because ESP learners are more motivated than learners of general English; both learners and teachers are more satisfied with the results.

Because ESP courses are designed to meet these specific needs of the learners these courses should draw closely from and be treated as extensions of the students' major disciplines. Moreover there should be a close collaboration between the language teacher and the content area teacher in course content determination through needs analysis, and the selection and adoption of authentic instructional materials. It is imperative that needs analysis includes the students' input from the beginning of a course design, as institutions and employers often perceive wants and needs differently from students.

What is an undisputed fact is that any ESP course should be needs driven, and has an *'emphasis on practical outcomes.'* (Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998, 1). Therefore needs analysis is and always will be an important and fundamental part of ESP (Gatehouse, 2001). It is *'the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course.'* (Dudley-Evan & St. John, 1998, 122).

Course Design and the role of the ESP instructor

The major factor that distinguishes designing an ESP course from that of General English course is that the specifications of the actual course content are prescribed by a coordinating body or ministry, in ESP the specifications of actual course content is derived by the teacher through the process of needs analysis.

Needs analysis is so central to the idea of ESP that it is difficult to conceive of an ESP course without needs analysis (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). It is the teacher who carries out the needs analysis from which he derives the syllabus.

An ESP teacher's responsibility is not just to teach the students but first and foremost identify their needs and draw up a syllabus that will offer them a unique learning experience. Through this process, too, the role of the teacher is different from that of the General English teacher who takes from a large stock of existing materials to teach his students. The ESP teacher's responsibility includes not just selecting authentic materials, but often writing his or her own material. This is because in ESP, the desired learning experiences which the ESP teacher may

envisage during needs analysis may not have ready made materials; and so when the teacher encounters such a situation, s/he either selects or designs. The teacher therefore becomes a programme developer, materials writer and implementer of the syllabus.

Most often, the materials needed are subject specific (e.g. English texts for students of Business, English texts for students of Nursing, English texts for students of Legal Studies, etc) which places constraints on the teacher because of the level of specialisation of these subjects. The ESP teacher needs to seek and adopt collaborative teaching strategies with other content specialist teachers.

In ESP, techniques and classroom practices should be conducted as an extension of various specialisations, which is a great departure from traditional English learning practice. It is therefore necessary for the ESP teacher collaborate with content teacher. They need to collaborate in order to draw up the needed learning experiences which students would be exposed to, select or write appropriate or authentic texts and team-teach the students. Such collaboration is bound to have a reciprocal effect on the subject teacher as well as on the ESP

teacher. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 64) "The subject teacher can help the ESP teacher in learning more about the teacher's target situation. At the same time, the ESP teacher can make the subject specialist more aware of the language problems learners and teachers face".

Because ESP courses themselves they are so diversified, for example English for Science and Technology (EST), English for Legal Practice (ELP), English for Business and Economics (EBE), English for Hotel and Tourism (EHT) and English for Social Sciences (ESS), that even within the general concept of ESP, the EST,ELP, EBE or EHT teachers should be considered different from each other, and should seek methodological guidance not from linguists but from the Science, Law or Business teachers and classes should be conducted as an extension of that particular discipline.

This position has important implications. Firstly, is the fact that the ESP teachers should collaborate with context teachers of his/her students to be able to

determine what will be regarded as acceptable course content. Secondly, the teaching of ESP should be contextualised. That is, ESP should be taught within its particular context, Law, Science or Business, whichever the case might be. Therefore, an ESP course may be conducted in workshops, laboratories, auditoriums, offices, depending on the circumstances. (Widdowson ,1986).

Strevens (1980) mentions that because ESP requires significant amounts of preparation time and well-seasoned, highly qualified teaching professionals. Practitioners must possess superb

collaboration and innovation skills as well as more traditional skills in classroom management and the preparation of syllabi, materials, and tests. He also states that ESP is not harnessed to any particular method, technique, or materials. In fact, he sees the "freedom to innovate" as one of the "major attractions" of ESP (p. 120).

Scope of ESP

That general English courses, more often than not, are not meeting the expectations of the employers as well as learners is not something new. In fact it was this increasing awareness that led to the term 'English for Specific Purposes' as far back as the 1960's.

Today, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has grown to become one of the most prominent areas of EFL teaching today. Its development is reflected in the increasing number of universities throughout the world offering an MA in ESP, all the way from the University of Birmingham to Mahidol University in Thailand, and in the number of ESP courses offered for overseas students in English speaking countries as well.

In Bangladesh, the increasing need for ESP has made many major national and multinational companies, banks, NGO's and software companies carry out in-house language training programmes (e.g. HSBC, BRAC Bank, Robi, Hotel Sonargao etc). They focus on their immediate needs for English without wasting time and effort on teaching irrelevant elements of English language.

Explaining the international scope of ESP, Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) offer three reasons: countries requiring English for internal communication (e.g., some African and Asian countries), the widespread use of scientific and technical English, and English for international communications (e.g., related to air and sea traffic, and to business).

Although the market for Business English courses is described as "booming" (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998), and is without a doubt the most familiar ESP course in Bangladesh, ESP is not limited to business English alone but is well established in the fields of science and technology, international business, and among aviation, marine navigation and medical professionals.

Commonly used ESP text-books
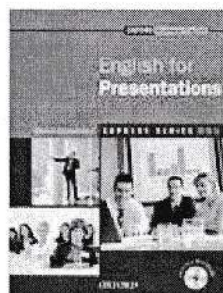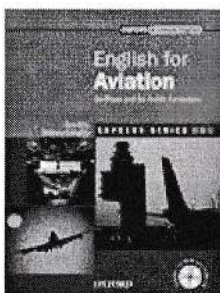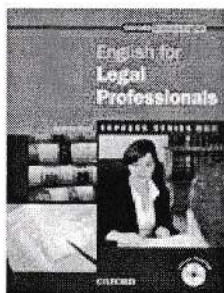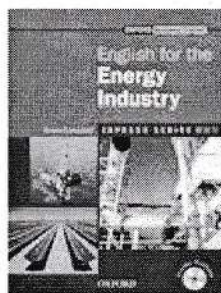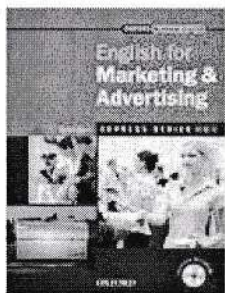
It should be noted that almost all of the books found on the market presently begin from the intermediate level (Mid B1 to mid C1)

If we take a Thailand as an example, we can see that the average English proficiency of Thai students is lower than that of students from other ASEAN countries based on TOEFL scores. Science students scored an average of 450 while social science and humanities students scored an average of 444. TWE score means of all examinees classified by native language based on 594,536 examinees who took the TWE test from August 1993 through May 1995 showed that the ability of Thai students was far behind the others. (Prapphal, 2001)

However, recognizing the need for ESP courses long before the 1990's, Mahidol University, the oldest and one of the most prestigious universities in Thailand, internationally known and recognised for the high-calibre research and lecturing talents of its faculty, and its outstanding achievements in teaching, research, international academic collaboration and professional services established a Master's degree programme in Teaching English for Specific Purposes in 1976, which was the first programme of this type in Thailand. It has since attracted students from a wide range of professions including education, law, science, and nursing. The aims of the programme are to train new teachers and further the knowledge of experienced teachers in the fields of general English and English

for specific purposes as well as broadening the scope of research into English language teaching and English for science and technology.

Today almost all universities in Thailand offer ESP courses. Some of them like Assumption University (ABAC), one of the leading Private universities in Thailand, have gone further and introduced Bachelors programmes in Business English.

In Ukraine, the National ESP (English for Specific Purposes) Curriculum for Universities, developed with the approval of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, is designed to help students to achieve target B2 language proficiency level as required for a Bachelor's degree.

If other countries in the world can recognize and successfully introduce ESP courses into their curriculums, then could universities in Bangladesh not do the same?

Concluding remarks

We cannot but be aware of how much the job market influences what courses are offered in our academic institutions.

The demise of computer science in the Bangladeshi job market, side by side with the recent increase in demand of BBA's and Economics graduates is ample evidence of this trend. With new television channels, advertising firms and newspapers coming out every day, there is now, more than ever a need for graduates with exceptional communication and language skills. However, It is very unfortunate that even though the demand is there, the majority of the graduates produced every year, fail to fulfil the needs of employers. It is clear that these   gaps between what is required and what is taught must be addressed.

However, in order to address these issues, Government recognition of the importance of ESP is absolutely imperative. This recognition would make the students feel the vitality of English for their future careers. It would also make the concerned universities take responsibility for providing necessary facilities and Offer ESP training for existing and future teachers in all public and private universities, as well as conducting refresher courses for teachers who teach ESP courses.

ESP teaching units need to be set up at each faculty. This will help develop a close rapport between the ESP teacher and faculty members (subject teachers). These units should not only provide language-based courses, they should also equip the students with personal, interpersonal and communication skills which will be of use in their future jobs.

Market-oriented courses should be offered to students who are going to use English as future employees or researchers. Such courses would make university curriculum outcomes get closer to the requirements of the employment market.

Conducting courses in collaboration with certain governments organisations and/or private establishments could also be another option. This could be done by inviting experts to contribute to the design or/and teaching of the course. Some experts of business, science or law could be occasionally invited to give lectures or demonstrations of certain skills, by giving some actual examples from the field.

To conclude it is undeniable that the English language courses in universities in Bangladesh need to examined and see if they can be made more relevant to students' needs, so that students may actually become motivated and see English language courses as a vehicle towards their academic and professional goal and provide them with a platform for life-long learning.

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