

Investigating Transformative Practices in the Bangladeshi Classroom

Rubaiyat Jahan, Nasreen Sultana Mitu

Abstract—This paper examines the theoretical construct of transformative practices, and reports some evidence of transformative practices from a couple of Bangladeshi English teachers. The idea of transformative practices calls for teachers' capabilities to invest their intellectual labor in teaching with an assumption that along with the academic advancement of the learners, it aims for the personal transformation for both the learners as well for themselves. Following an ethnographic research approach, data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews, informal talks and classroom observations for a period of one year. In relevance to the English classroom of the Bangladeshi context, from this study, references of transformative practices have been underlined from the participant teachers' views on English language teaching as well as from their actual practices. According to data of this research, some evidence of transformative practices in the form of *critical language awareness* and *personal theories of practices* emerge from the participants' articulation of the beliefs on teaching; and from the participant teachers' classroom practices evidence of *self-directed acts of teaching*, *self-directed acts of professional development*, and *liberatory autonomy* have been highlighted as the reflections of transformative practices. The implication of this paper refers to the significance of practicing teachers' articulation of beliefs and views on teaching along with their orientation to critical pedagogical relations.

Keywords—Critical language awareness, personal theories of practices, teacher autonomy, transformative practices.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN recent times, the culture of structured classroom pedagogy often tends to delimit teachers' freedom of using their pedagogical choices in classroom teaching [10], [17]. The idea of this structured type of pedagogy is enrooted into the so-called 'teacher proof' curriculum package where teachers' personal reflection is neglected to a larger extent. Arguably, technocratic and instrumental pedagogical choices are considered as key reasons behind this mechanical teaching learning culture [10]. Being the media of delivering this structured step-by-step instrumental service, teachers often fail to serve with their intellectual labor and to use their critical insights related to their particular political, social and economic contexts. Under this reality, teachers' role needs a paradigm shift from a mere teaching practitioner towards a critical practitioner, which is conceptualized as a transformative practitioner [17]. The idea of a transformative practitioner thereby refers to a more proactive role on part of a

teacher who is keen to take the responsibility to be a transformative intellectual or change agent; hence, along with the academic advancement of the learners, a teacher will work for the personal transformation for both the learners as well for him/herself [14].

The focus of this study is to investigate the evidence of teachers' transformative practices from their classroom teaching. In doing so, the data of this research were collected from a couple of Bangladeshi English teachers. To extract this idea of transformative practices into the Bangladeshi context English language classroom potentially has a larger scope. It is primarily because of the fact that the researchers claim English language should not be seen as an innocent entity [16], [23]. Researchers seem to problematize English language teaching (ELT) at the non-English speaking contexts, particularly because of the colonial root English language inherently carries [22], [23]. Also, not only did the English language gain its prominence through the spreading of colonialism, but in fact it was the colonialism that co-constructed the nature of the English language [22]. A similar attitude towards English is expressed by stating that "[T]he domination of English is therefore not only a *result* of politico-economic inequalities between the centre and periphery, it is also a *cause* of these inequalities" [7, p. 41]. Consequently, English has also been labeled as a tool of inequalities in terms of linguisticism [24]. Linguicism is one aspect of linguistic imperialism which legitimizes and reproduces power imbalances between the groups which are defined on the basis of the language one speaks (e.g. English and other languages). For an English language classroom, in the non-English speaking contexts (e.g. Bangladesh), the effect of linguisticism can be realized mostly in terms of choice of standard norms of English proficiency and the learners' identity in relation to using English. Ideologically, transformative practice tends to help the language learners establish their context sensitive identity with a sense of ownership of English. Also, to highlight other features of transformative practices as a means of evidence from Bangladeshi English teachers' practices, it is essential to focus on some issues such as teacher, as well as learner autonomy. A transformative teacher, therefore, would be autonomous in terms of generating context sensitive personal theories of teaching with a view to transcending the structured classroom pedagogy. The idea of personal theories of teaching corresponds to the pedagogy of practicality [17]. While procedural and personal components of autonomy promote the abilities for actualizing autonomies on the part of both teachers and learners; the critical aspects of autonomy facilitates the capabilities of questioning the relevance of

R. J. is with the Institute of Education & Research, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi-6205, Bangladesh (e-mail: finnegunwake@yahoo.com).

N. S. M. is with the Institute of Education & Research, University of Rajshahi, Rajshahi-6205, Bangladesh (e-mail: nsmetoo@gmail.com).

knowledge formation in relation to their social, economic and political contexts [8], which is nonetheless the essence of the notion of transformative practices.

Though teachers' role as transformative practitioners has been justified at the theoretical level, the degree of actualization is difficult to underscore from an etic point of view. As transformative practice is related to the participant teachers' perceived life and beliefs, and might not be visible in the form of some particular teaching techniques if not linked with their ideological stances; hence, an ethnographic approach seems appropriate to explore the evidence of these practices.

II. METHODOLOGY

Ethnographic research essentially deals with cultural phenomena (e.g. belief, practice, tradition and behaviors) of an individual or a group and tries to relate with the broader societal norms [19]. It should be mentioned beforehand that this study does not intend to pin down some visible relationship of teaching-learning culture and teachers' actual practices. Rather, it aims to resemble an abstract relationship of teachers' beliefs on ELT and their actual practices. In relation to the broader aspects of ethnography it has been claimed that, "...instead of treating the school as a container filled with teacher cultures, student subgroups, classroom instruction, and administrative micropolitics, I look at one school... as an intersection in social space, a knot in a web of practices that stretch into complex systems beginning and ending outside the school." [21, p. 13].

For this research, initially data were collected from five practicing school teachers of English. However, analyzed data shows that although all the participant teachers teaching preferences have merits of their own, but not many of their understanding of ELT as well as their actual teaching practices correspond to the objectives of this study. Under this reality, this study presents cases of one male (*Kafi*) and one female (*Shreya*) English teachers of Bangladesh. Following the author's [12] suggestions of ethnographic research data collection procedure, data were collected using in-depth interviews, informal talks, and classroom observations throughout a period of one year. As part of their professional development, both the teachers have participated in different training programs where both the researchers were their instructors. During their training period, through both inside the classroom and informal conversations, they expressed their thoughts and beliefs on different aspects of their personal and professional experiences. For the purpose of this study, it was eminent that the participant teachers' *emic* views on ELT and how potentially those views can be reflected in their actual teaching are to be extracted. In doing so, semi-structured in-depth interviews of those teachers were audio recorded. Considering the ethical issues of this research participant teachers' pseudonyms were used and no questions of a personal in nature were asked.

III. RESULTS

A. Case Study One

In the context of Bangladesh, as a result of the stereotypical gender role defined by the prevailing society, women are socially encouraged to choose a few limited career paths, and teaching in schools is one such common profession they are to choose. *Shreya*, a participant in this study, is an individual within the same social structure, who at some point of her life chose the same conventional course of life. In her teaching career, she has been teaching English at the elementary and secondary levels for five years. One thing worth mentioning is that, *Shreya* represents the first generation English teachers of the country having an ELT background. Even though her gender identity seems to have influenced her job selection, she is aware of that social stereotype and wants to play the role of a 'change-agent' through her teaching.

Shreya's deliberate urge to break the stereotypical image of a school teacher, and her endeavor to create a model identity in her profession drives her for consistent development in teaching. Realizing the limitations of the recommended textbooks as well as the provided teaching resources, she explores different resources and tries to make the best use of those materials such as newspaper cuttings, leaflets etc. The comment of *Shreya*, extracted below, shows that she finds it useful to use various resources:

"...I mean if I use something from a magazine than textbooks they could see it... I mean something new that makes them (students) more interested and keen I suppose ...when I use something different they become more interested.. I notice in that case, class response also increases."

As part of the administrative practice of *Shreya's* school, an active classroom monitoring system is run by the school administration. According to *Shreya*, she does not rely only on this formal procedure of classroom monitoring as a means of her professional development. Rather, an effort of identity creation on the part of *Shreya* is evident in her search for independent ways of professional development. She sometimes tries to seek assistance from her colleagues through informal talks regarding her teaching strategies and techniques, of which she is not confident enough. Consequently, she uses other teachers' experience and knowledge to improve her own teaching. Standing against the Bangladeshi social context where it is fairly unusual to seek professional help from peer colleagues, *Shreya* rationalizes this approach by saying that she values the experiences of the senior colleagues, and does not hesitate to admit her relatively limited experience in teaching. Apart from these approaches, it appears from *Shreya's* statement that she tried to make the best use of all the training and workshops she participated. During those sessions, she raised questions about the specific problems she experienced in her teaching and looked for suggestions to overcome the challenges that emerged in her classroom.

Although *Shreya's* sense of accountability and her drive for being a model in her profession encourages her for the

betterment in every instant, her critical insight keeps questioning the existing education system at the same time. *Shreya's* views on education embrace much broader aspects in meaning making, tries to look beyond the conventional classroom teaching, and critically analyzes if the existing system to make the learning meaningful in a true sense. In a casual talk, *Shreya* stated that her own experience made her realized how ineffective conventional English teaching is to develop learners' critical insight. Because of this, she designs her lesson in a way that the learners can facilitate their learning based on their own social experiences. In discussing how she possibly could help her learners to establish their identities, she clarifies the fact that learners have to think critically and their learning needs to be related to their particular socio-economic context. Her statement exemplifies one instance of her specific acts in classroom that was intended to tap learners' critical faculty. In reference to describing one such classroom activity that necessitates learners' critical thinking, *Shreya's* teaching technique seems illustrative and that is given below:

"...in class six there is a story of a boy who is a cleaner who became sick for a week or so, so could not clean the suburb... as a result this, the suburb becomes stinking and dirty... all the residents start suffering for this... and after a week when that cleaner starts working again then all the residents of that suburb feel his contribution to this society, though usually his work remains unnoticed until he got sick and remained absent from his job... I discuss the story in the class and then I ask the students try to find out other such people who they think really contribute in society but who remain unnoticed...I ask them to think and tell me about such people and their job... some of them wrote about a night guard, some of them speak of a postman... I think that according to their age group, those are good responses."

Shreya always tries to add her critical insights in her teaching and goes beyond the socio cultural issues she herself experienced in her own life. She works for her own professional development in every possible way using all available resources, and being a language teacher, she consistently tries to tap the learners' critical faculty with a view to developing their socio political awareness.

B. Case Study Two

Born into a middle class family, *Kafi* represents the post-independence first generation educated Bangladeshi. When he looks back, after sixteen years of teaching along with a span of seventeen years of studentship of his own, he can see the gradual transformation in the schooling system as well as in teaching. To *Kafi*, teaching is always emotional and value laden, as he was brought up seeing his father who was also a school teacher.

During his student life, he was a political activist (lean towards the leftist ideology) with a vision that students like him will bring a change in society; as time goes by and the reality changes, the dream of changing the world into a better place though does not become faded in him. Nevertheless,

with time his cherished dream of 'bring[ing] change in society' reroutes its form and it is enrooted in his real life professional activities. *Kafi's* teaching ideas seem to be enmeshed with his political beliefs, and that is evident in his perception regarding the Western world. In relation to classroom teaching, to him, English language is one key representation of the Western world along with English teaching methods (e.g. CLT). He appears to be very much cautious in the teaching and use of English. As part of his professional development, *Kafi* studied in the US for a semester. During his stay, communication with the non-natives seemed to be easier for him, while he often failed to communicate with Native speakers of English, which he believed is primarily because of his local accent. Another thing he felt is that because of his local accent in many cases during his participation in classroom discussion he found it challenging to voice his ideas. In discussing the *standard* norms of English he quite often refers to the need of the local variety of English, and emphasizes on the establishment of the identity of the learners as second/foreign language users. A good example of such a statement, made by *Kafi*, is given below:

"Don't think we can or should have native like standard but surely we should have our own standardized English after 12 years of effort ...like ... say... India or other countries... point is to communicate successfully."

When standing in front of his students in the class, *Kafi* not only defines his teaching based on his theoretical knowledge and skills he gathered throughout his teaching career, rather his own learning experience from his student life has its reflection on his teaching in many ways. Despite *Kafi's* good hold of English grammar in his school days, he realized that he failed to articulate his feelings in English the way he wanted to. He also found it challenging to read English newspapers during his school days. As he explains, the language orientation (i.e., sentence construction, vocabulary, genre of writing/reading, etc.) we have in school appears to have very limited use of real life applications. Hence, he suggests that learners should have exposures to English beyond the classrooms as well as beyond the recommended textbooks.

Kafi's grammar item teaching is a good case in point to put forward his realization. In one class he was trying to create a situation where the learners could have the opportunity to notice the intended grammar rules by themselves. When teaching voice changes (active to passive and passive to active) of the sentence, without mentioning direct terminology and without explaining the necessary grammar rules, he wrote three sentences on the board:

Sentence 1. 20 thousand workers built the Taj Mahal.

Sentence 2. The Taj Mahal was built by 20 thousand workers.

Sentence 3. The Taj Mahal was built.

Then he asked the learners to read the sentences carefully, and figure out how they are different in terms of meaning. Also, he instructed them to notice the form/position of *subject* and *object* of the particular sentences; how they are presented

in direct or indirect forms in relevance with the meaning of the sentences. He further explained how the subject of *sentence 1* became unimportant for a particular situation (referring to *sentence 2*). Then finally, Kafi discussed the structured format of the active and passive sentences of grammar rules. The paraphrased extract of *Kafi's* inductive ways of grammar teaching clearly underlines an effort on his part to teach in such a way that the expected learning can potentially be related to the real life applications of the learners.

Kafi demonstrates his clear understanding in discussing the challenges associated with a teacher's theorizing role (referring to pedagogy of practicality) as he talks of how his idea of teaching can be standardized through workshops and how this teaching idea can be made available to other teachers if they want to follow it:

"if you want to bring uniformity or standardized teaching... you need to have workshop on it... conducted by the practicing teachers... sharing and discussing...based on this they will develop slides for all... teachers will help with ideas and technicians will record it for all... also government should back this up... also nowadays we have few websites... we can upload there..."

IV. DISCUSSION

Using ethnographic approach, this study endeavors to bridge a couple of English teachers' (*Shreya* and *Kafi*) perceptions on ELT with their actual teaching practices with an emphasis on of the extent these two teachers' individual selves have been reflected in their practices. The findings tend to suggest that their teaching practices resemble a few aspects (e.g. critical language awareness, self-directed acts of teaching and self-directed acts of professional development, liberatory autonomy, personal theories of practices, etc.) of transformative practices in relevance with the Bangladeshi English classroom. Empirical literature survey on teacher cognition [4], [5] tries to examine the teachers' stated beliefs in relation to classroom teaching, and seems to state that teachers' beliefs tend to influence their classroom decision making processes. In relation to the issues of teacher cognition, both *Shreya* and *Kafi's* classroom practices appear to reflect their beliefs on their perceptions regarding English language, necessity of learners' critical engagement and approaches of grammar teaching. Furthermore, during classroom observations, a resemblance of their perceived ideas of teaching are to an extent reflected in their actual practices.

A. Teacher Autonomy

One similarity is evident in the cases of *Shreya* and *Kafi* that both the teachers expressed their dissatisfaction on the existing classroom pedagogy, and tended to work for the empowerment of the learners as well as for themselves. An overall understanding of their situation sheds light on the fact that both of them tried to transcend their assumed dissatisfaction in their own unique way, and their classroom decision making process is indicative of their autonomous practices to a larger extent. In the context of language

teaching, teacher autonomy refers to teachers' freedom from control by the administrative and institutional impositions, and the opportunities they have to exercise discretion in curriculum implementation [2].

Shreya's use of alternative teaching resources (e.g. magazine, newspaper cutting, leaflet, etc.) in her classroom refers to her self-directed acts of teaching which can be associated with one aspect of teacher autonomy [18], [20]. Another interesting feature of *Shreya's* self-directed acts of teaching is exemplified when she mentioned, during an informal talk, how she involved the parents of inattentive learners to encourage their children in active participation in the classroom activities.

The self-directed act of professional development [18], [20], which is another facet of teacher autonomy, can also be seen in *Shreya's* case. As stated by *Shreya*, for her own professional development she mostly relied on her own reflection and based on the reflections to address the emerging issues in her teaching, she usually seeks suggestions from senior colleagues. *Shreya's* reflective practice for her professional development can also be associated to the extent with a suggested cycle of 'observation, reflection, and action' for self-regulated professional development [17]. In the case of *Kafi*, his self-directed professional development relied more on published journals, teachers' blogs, etc. which again can be related to the idea of post-method professional development [14]. In addition to this, one key critical dimension of teacher autonomy is reflected when *Kafi's* rationalizes how he possibly can establish this customized way of teaching as a unique teaching methodology sensitive to their own teaching contexts (referring to pedagogy of practicality). *Kafi's* idea of this theorizing role is significant as it challenges the conventional expert generated teaching-learning theory [18], and which accordingly addresses the core notion of transformative practices. In describing transformative practitioners, it has been asserted that people who 'critically examine the world and its processes, including the political and educational institutions that maintain social inequalities' subsequently try to work as a 'change agent' to transcend those inequalities existed in the social pattern [11, p. 121].

B. Learner Autonomy

Both *Shreya* and *Kafi* are illustrative enough not only in terms of their autonomous practices of teaching, but evidence also tends to portray that both of them are keen to facilitate learners' autonomy. While *Kafi's* classroom teaching indicates learners' 'academic autonomy', *Shreya* on the other hand is eager to facilitate their 'liberatory autonomy' [15], [17]. Prioritizing learners' interest to choose topics for writing task, or engaging learners in exploring grammatical structure from a given text are some noticeable examples of academic autonomy that have been observed in *Kafi's* classroom. As far as liberatory autonomy is concerned, *Shreya's* problem posing classroom activities that require learners' critical engagement are demonstrative enough. A good example of how learners can be critically engaged in problem-posing activities has been illustrated in [1]. The research [1] provides five steps of

activities that can ensure learners' critical engagement: (i) describe a cultural text related to a problem pertaining to learners' lived experiences, (ii) ask questions to help students identify and clarify the problem, (iii) ask them to share similar experiences, (iv) help them analyze the root of causes of the problem, and (v) help them strategize possible responses. An identical description of the classroom activities, as discussed in [1], that require critical thinking on part of the learners can be seen in *Shreya's* classroom. In teaching English in a non-native context, such as here in Bangladesh, *Shreya* primarily preferred local issues for writing practice for the learners, and she tried to engage the learners in producing a text where they could relate their lived experiences. This particular instance of *Shreya's* classroom teaching, and other such efforts, can also be interpreted as transformative practice on her part, as this type of task can potentially help the learners to be socio-politically aware. However, it can be argued that transformative practice exists more on the abstract level than on actual practices; hence, it was difficult to underline many more evidences of the construct of transformative practices in *Shreya's* actual classroom setting. Likewise, it has been stated that "potentially transformative characteristics that are already present in many teachers, even if those are formulated in naive forms or in common sense terms" [9, p. 210].

C. Critical Language Awareness

While *Shreya* felt the need of learners' critical engagement in the learning process, hence tried to improve her teaching primarily to facilitate learners' critical insights; *Kafi* on the other hand did the same thing, but his focus was mostly on the critical language awareness of the learners. In relation to the idea of critical language awareness [15], these two teachers expressed their beliefs on the expected English proficiency of the learners. Both *Shreya* and *Kafi* are aware of their limitations of teaching English (referring mostly to oral English) in the Bangladeshi context; and they are in favor of local Standard English. While *Kafi* calls for the need of a local variety of English like the Indian variety of English, *Shreya* rather tends to advocate for an intelligible international variety with which the learners can be able to communicate with the people of other countries regardless the contexts of English speaking or non-English speaking. *Kafi* emphasizes the significance of English language learners' identity in non-English speaking context with the view that the learners should know the use of English not only in terms of a tool of communication, but at the same time their use of English would be appreciated and recognized. In relation to language learners' identity, it is similarly pointed out that the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships, and when a person speaks, the speaker wishes not only to be understood, but to be "believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished" [6, p. 648].

In this paper, evidence of learners' critical language awareness, teacher and learner autonomy in relation to the Bangladeshi English classroom has been reported, and as argued earlier, those issues resemble some features of the theoretical constructs of transformative practices. *Shreya's*

effort to critically engage the learners in the classroom activity and *Kafi's* views on how possibly one can record his/her personal ways of teaching manifest the crux of transformative practices.

V. IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The significance of this paper lies with the portrayal of the participant teachers' subtle references of transformative practices. At this postmodern era, these cases exemplify some indications of post-method practices [17] when it is evident that both *Kafi* and *Shreya* try to characterize personal ways of teaching even within a structured classroom setting. It is worth mentioning here that the participant teachers' articulation of their views on ELT, along with perceived lived lives, play a crucial role in highlighting some glimpses of transformative practices. Implication of this study corresponds to the significance of teachers' articulation of beliefs on teaching as well as teachers' orientation to critical pedagogical relations. While English language teacher education programs usually addresses some political aspects of ELT, it is equally important that to prepare the prospective English teachers as transformative practitioners, teacher education programs should help them with the articulation of subjective understanding of teaching as well as teaching-learning situations. Study [3] shows how a training program can help teachers to articulate their beliefs on teaching, and how articulation of beliefs on teaching can have good impact on the in-service training program. Similarly, to make prospective teachers more aware of the ideological issues in ELT, [13] discusses a model of critical language teacher education constituting critical awareness, critical self-reflection, and critical pedagogical relations. Hence, as it appears, to emphasize transformative practices in teaching, teacher education programs need to incorporate some ideas that facilitate prospective teachers' critical orientations to pedagogical choices and articulations of subjective understanding of teaching.

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