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Decolonizing English Studies in Bangladesh and Integrating Bengali Literature into English Language and Literature Education at Tertiary Level: A Case Study

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Decolonizing English Studies in Bangladesh and Integrating Bengali Literature into English Language and Literature Education at Tertiary Level: A Case Study

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The implementation of the study of Bengali literature in the departments of English Language and Literature (ELL) in Bangladesh is to date a "to be or not to be" issue in most of the universities in general. Being a twice-born country, Bangladesh still seems to fail to liberate herself from the mental colonial legacy in many aspects of national life, including the university education. Taking a mixed-method approach, this paper examined the perceptions of different stakeholders within English studies- here, tertiary level teachers and students in ELL Department about the issues related to the integration of Bengali literature into English Studies at tertiary level. In doing so, we investigated: (a) learners' knowledge in English and Bengali literature, (b) the problems they face (if there is any) due to the limited Bengali practice at universities, (c) their perceptions of the potential benefits of studying Bengali at tertiary level, (d) their opinions regarding the inclusion of Bengali literature into English Studies and finally, (e) the linguistic medium in which Bengali literature can be presented to the learners at tertiary level. This paper might be one of the most important steps to decolonize the English Studies as it is argued here that in order to create intercultural awareness of the learners, their (learners') own socio-cultural and traditional values must be presented to them through native literature in original form.

Keywords: *Decolonization, education, English studies, Bengali literature, intercultural awareness.*

Introduction

Colonialism and education go hand in hand in dominating and subjugating third world countries, such as Bangladesh. According to concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics (1996), colonialism is "The policy and practice of a strong power extending its control territorially over a weaker nation or people". The purpose of colonial education in colonies (e.g. Indian-subcontinent) was the "consolidation of British Empire, recruitment of clerks, spreading of English Literature, promoting craze for English articles and English textiles, preparing a class of interpreters of English laws, and translating literary master pieces of Indian religious books into English" (Rather, 2004, p. 26). After ruling nearly two hundred years, it is likely that the British colonizers have met their ultimate goal of mental subjugation not with weapons but with chalks and blackboard.

One of the definitions about the term is:

> Decolonization is the process of revelating and dismantling colonialist poser in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remains even after political independence is achieved (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 56).

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Though the British colonial Government was abolished in 1947, its legacy is still dominant in Bangladesh - a fact that has been termed by Gramsci as *cultural hegemony*. Since the commencement of the British Colonization in India till date, English has been the language of domination and power. This cultural domination exists even today in educational sectors, especially in the English Language and Literature (ELL) study, in post-colonial countries.

A close observation of the syllabus in the departments of ELL reveals that countries like Bangladesh are still lingering the influence of British colonial legacy. The most dominant portion in the curricula of the department of ELL is based on British literature. However, literatures from the different countries such as American, Africa, Arabian, Indian literature, etc. have been taken into account in the departments of ELL in Bangladesh. This step seems to be giving us the idea to get rid of the British influence academically and decolonizing the departments of ELL to some extent, but still this process is not leading the students to their own cultural orientation because there is little scope to study Bengali Literature along with English literature of the ELL department within English studies in Bangladeshi universities. For example, by studying African literature, students are learning about African societies. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe gives students a notion of family structure of Africa, socio-cultural and economic system of Ibo society. Again by learning Indian literature as *The Guide* by R.K. Narayan, they come to know about the Indian Culture. Thus, the students are getting acquainted to the cultures of others except their own culture; therefore, it is not a pure step towards the decolonization of English Studies.

This problem within the current English curricula is generally overlooked in Bangladesh. Students are learning about other cultures, albeit they are somehow deprived of the opportunity to learn their own culture by studying Bengali literature alongside English and other literatures.

Purpose of the Research

In this paper we claim that avoiding one's own identity, one cannot understand the identity of others, so the students in the Departments of ELL must be acquainted with their own culture first. As the process of decolonizing our English Studies in the English Departments of Bangladesh, we cannot claim English Studies in the university curricula fruitless, since the English language has become an international language providing a common tongue to communicate with the people of other language. This paper focuses the importance of intermingling of Bengali literature with English literature in the ELL departments as a way of decolonization. In doing this, this paper examines the perceptions of the tertiary level teachers and students majoring in ELL about the integration of Bengali literature within English studies in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

The British Aim of Modern Education System

Nehru (1991) points out the bad impact of British Education System through his speech. He divides the intention of the British into two with which, he thinks, they came up in the Indian Sub-continent. He asks:

> Which aspect of England came to Indian Sub-Continent? Did Shakespeare and Milton's England which was impoverished in its own language and literature, in the courageous activities, in the political revolutions; did that England come to India which is the pioneer of science and technology, or, another England which had the intention not to enlighten the state but to rule them and suppress them? (Translated from Bengali by the present researchers)

There is no doubt that a second type of England came to the Indian Sub-continent. It should be mentioned here that Lord Macaulay wanted to recommend such an educational system by dint of which the educated people will be "Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion, in intellect" (Rahim, 2000, p. 134). In this context, Nagugi wa Thiong'O (1986) says, "Thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds". (*Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*)

Importance of Integrating Bengali Literature into ELL

Each coin has two sides. Despite the negative effects of English studies mentioned above, the importance of English studies cannot be ignored. In the convocation ceremony of Calcutta University Tagore (as cited in Rahman, 2012) said,

> If the study of Bengali and English language and literature gets united with each other like that of the confluence of Ganges and Yamuna, then for the Bengali students the premise will be like that of pilgrimage…Thus, the achievement of English language and literature can never be denied. (pp. 44-5, translated from Bengali by the present researchers)

Further speech of Tagore (as cited in Rahman, 2012) in that convocation ceremony was:

> …we can gather energy or source from the foreign languages only, but the real energy or the real source is found in our own language for our own self-revelation. (Translated from Bengali by the present researchers)

He (Tagore) further says (as cited in Rahman, 2004) that during this era of globalization, we cannot protest against English language and literature. We should compromise with this foreign language for our own sake (p. 157, translated from Bengali by the present researchers). Another matter needs to be remembered that, Ezra Pound thinks learning all languages is necessary because a language does not cover all human wisdom, and a language does not have the sensor to feel all kinds of human expression (p. 155, translated from Bengali by the present researchers).

Research Methodology

Research Questions

This paper, as mentioned before, explores the issues regarding the implementation of Bengali literature in the departments of ELL in order to accelerate the process of decolonizing the current English language and literature education system in Bangladesh. The following research questions are investigated:

1. What are the opinions of the tertiary level students majoring in ELL about their knowledge of Bengali and English literature?
2. What do teachers and the aforesaid students consider about the integration of Bengali literature within English literature curriculum?
3. In what form should Bengali literature be presented to the tertiary level students majoring in ELL?
4. What are the teachers' and above mentioned students' experiences about (if there is any) the problems of studying ELL without the study of any course related to their mother tongue?
5. What are the participants' perceptions about the possible benefits of the study of Bengali literature along with English Study in the department of ELL?

Method

For the purpose of the study a mixed-method approach is used in order to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. As for the research instrument, two separate survey questionnaires were used for teachers and students. Moreover, there were also two 'open' questions in the questionnaires (Research Question No. 2 & 3) that allowed five teachers and ten selected students to: a) share their experiences about the problems of studying ELL without the study of any course related to mother tongue, b) share their opinions about the benefits of studying Bengali literature along with English Study in the department of ELL. For a sample questionnaire see Appendix-1(Questionnaire for Students) and Appendix-2(Questionnaire for Teachers). The participants of this questionnaire were total 15 students from master's level and senior undergraduate level—7th and 8th semester of ELL at IIUC, holding CGPA 3.25 and above. In order to conduct the survey teachers were requested to give 15-20 minutes during the class schedules. A direct interaction over the questions was made by the researchers of this paper with the students while doing the survey. As for data analysis, the quantitative data were analyzed using MS Excel while the qualitative data were analyzed by finding themes that are pertinent to research questions. The data collected from the open-ended questions in the questionnaires were coded following Richard's (2003) model. The responding teachers and students were coded as T1, T2...T5 and S1, S2....S10. The secondary data comprises of references from research articles, newspapers, books, internet, etc.

Findings

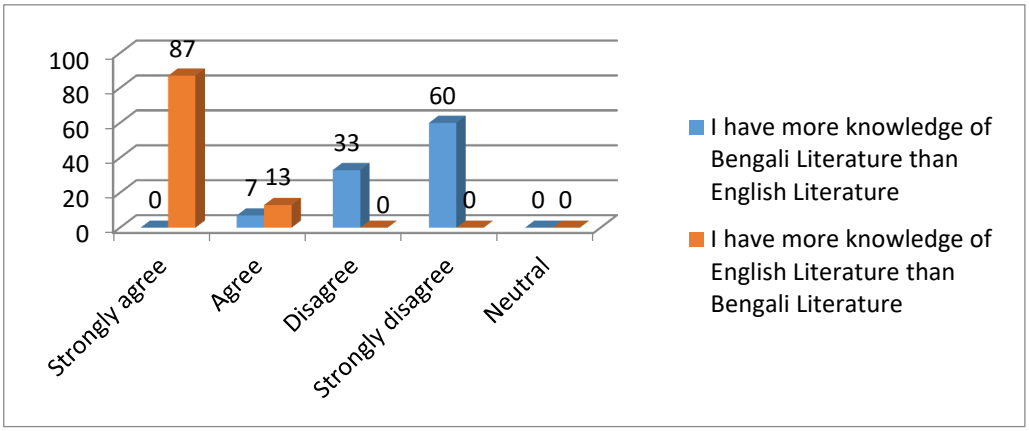
Close-ended Questionnaire (Quantitative) Data

Learners' Knowledge in English and Bengali Literature

Fifteen students were asked on their knowledge of Bengali and English literature in order to examine in which field they are more knowledgeable. In the survey, the results show that 87% and 13% students select 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' respectively in support of the knowledge of English literature with its contemporary incidents. In comparison to it, the results of Bengali literature are 7% 'Agree', 33% 'Disagree' and 60% 'Strongly disagree'.

Figure-1

Learners' knowledge in English and Bengali literature

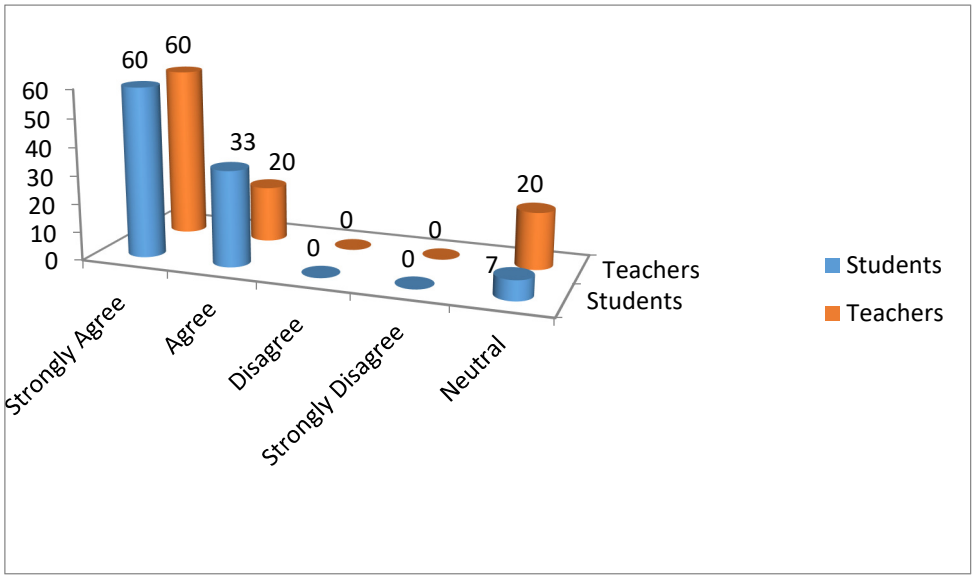


The Study of Bengali Literature Should Be Included in the University Curricula along with Greek and Latin, Arabic in Translation and African and European Literature as a Way of Decolonization

The results of this question stand as 60% 'Strongly agree' and 33% 'Agree' by the students and 60% 'Strongly Agree' and 20% 'Agree' by the teachers. 20% teachers and 7% students remain 'Neutral' from both sides.

Figure-2

People's Opinion regarding Inclusion of Bengali Literature along with that of Other Global Languages

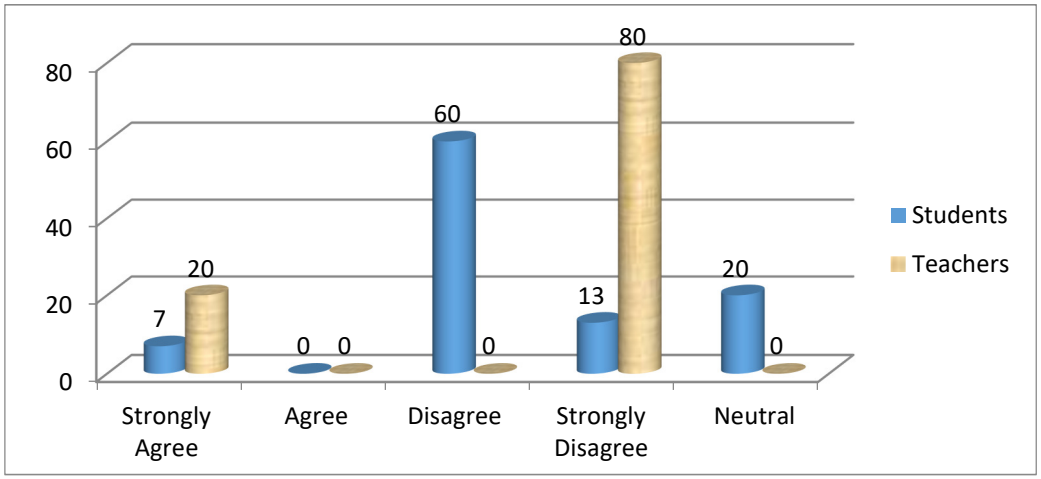


Bengali Literature should be Taught in the University Level in English Translation

As the results illustrate, most of the students of English Department at IIUC do not support the study of Bengali literature in English Translation. Among the students, 60% select 'Disagree', 13% 'Strongly Disagree', and 20% 'Neutral' except 7% 'Strongly Agree'. Even most of the teachers reject the study of Bengali literature in English translation by selecting 80% 'Strongly disagree' option. It has been found that only 20% teachers 'Agree' that Bengali literature should be studied in English translation.

Figure-3

Bengali Literature should be Taught in the University Level in English Translation

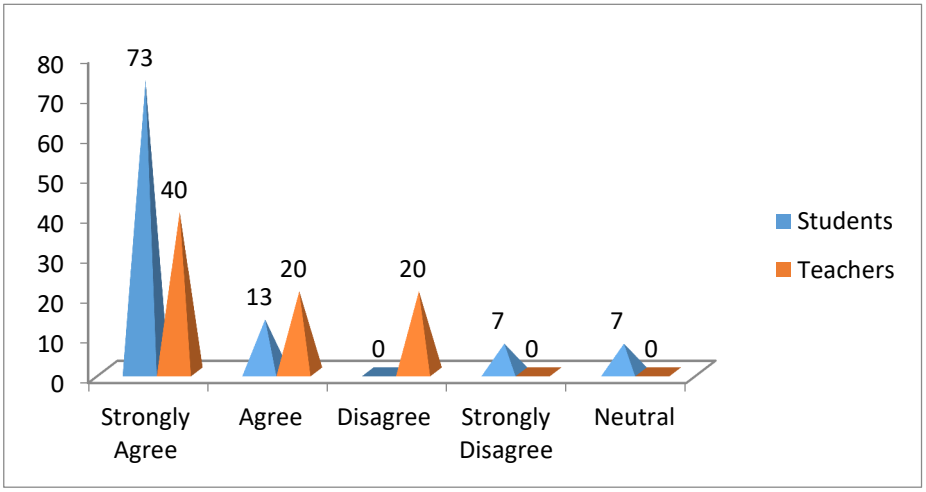


Bengali Literature should be Taught at the University Level in Bengali Language

Against the above statement, both teachers and the students answered in favor of the implication for Bengali literature in its own form. 73% students choose 'Strongly agree', 13% 'Agree', 7% 'Strongly disagree' and 7% remain 'Neutral'. On the other hand, 40% teachers choose 'Strongly agree', 20% 'Agree' in the positive liked-scale option while 20% choose 'Disagree'.

Figure-4

Bengali Literature should be Taught in the University Level in Bengali Language



Findings of the Open Questionnaire (Qualitative data): Thematic Presentation

The Problems the Tertiary Level Learners Face Due to the Limited Bengali Practice at University

Some respondents think that they (students) are being deprived of the Bengali literature as there is no study of such pieces in the Department of English at IIUC. T3 remarks:

> *"They have no idea about their own literature which has been enriched by classic writers who wrote realistic, insightful, thought- provoking literary pieces" (T3).*

S3 says that the students lack in the knowledge of Bengali historical periods.

> *"As there is no study of Bengali at the university level, we are not only being deprived of the major pieces, but also we do not get the notion of those historical periods in which the writers wrote their literary pieces."(S3)*

Regarding the identity and cultural crisis S4 says,

> *"We are losing our identity and originality due to the lack of knowledge on our own background and literary works" (S4).*

Likewise, T4 thinks, the students of ELL Departments are unknown of their own 'Culture and Context' and therefore, S6 says s/he is suffering from—

> *"Inferiority complex, Cultural crisis, Indifference about own mother tongue…" (S6).*
> *"It creates a gap between us and our literature after HSC level" (S8).*

Here, T5 points out a possible cause for students' interest towards English culture more than own culture.

> *"As the students are failing to understand the value of their own literature, they are being marginalized within English culture and taste, and they are showing negligence towards Bengali culture underestimating it as a poor culture" (T5).*

Poor linguistic skill is one of the major problems opined by many students like S1, S2 and T1. For example, S1 states that because of not practicing Bengali writing s/he is having problem with spelling and diction.

> "I fail to choose proper dictions and face spelling problem while writing something in Bengali" (S1).

S2 says that her/his Bengali writing is not up to the mark due to the lack of academic practice.

> "*Bengali literature helps us to develop our linguistic skills while conveying what we want to say and write. It has a rhythm of life which is still unknown to most of us. As a result, our linguistic skills have not reached up to the mark." (S2)*

T1 opines regarding the students' lack in expression and excellence in their writings:

> "*The students are suffering from the lack of perfection in writing and in expressing something" (T1).*

Participants' Perceptions of the Potential Benefits of Studying Bengali at Tertiary Level

In the questionnaire survey most of the participants comment on the benefit of comparative study. The participants comment that the inclusion of Bengali literature in the university curricula will make the learners eligible for a comparative study by means of which they can get a clear notion of their own culture. In this regard, S9 remark:

> *"We can compare English society and the Greek society through the study of such literature as English literature and Greek and Latin in Translation. When Bengali literature will be added in the curricula, we will be able to compare the two societies more profoundly than the present state." (S9)*

T1 says that comparative study will increase the arena of different literature before the students.

> *It will increase the arena of knowing own literature along with other literatures (T1).*

Cultural awareness will be increased if Bengali literature is included along with English studies. S5 thinks:

> *English is quite different from our cultural habits and aspects. So, we would feel good and relieved if we study Bengali novels, stories of some famous writers (S5).*

S2 believes that Bangladesh will strengthen its heritage and originality only when the teaching of Bengali will be widespread.

> *Bangladesh will gain its heritage and originality only when the teaching of Bengali will be widespread (S2).*

Pointing out a possible way for decolonizing English Studies, T2 comments:

> *Decolonizing the English Studies is a must for the Department of ELL in Bangladesh. Inclusion of Bengali Literature study in the universities of Bangladesh may be the best step to reclaim its own past and originality (T2).*

S7 considers that the study of literature in Bengali may increase learners' understanding of English literature. S7 remarks:

> *If we study Bengali literature, it will increase our critical thinking (S7).*

S4 says that the study of Bengali literature along with English major courses will enhance their intuitive sense.

> *Bengali literature along with English major courses will enhance our intuitive sense (S4).*

T3 opines that the study of Bengali literature will accelerate the students' critical thinking ability more rapidly than English literature.

> *The study of Bengali literature based on mother tongue will accelerate the students' critical thinking ability more rapidly than English literature (T3).*

T3 also finds Bengali literature as a solution to problems faced by the students relating to life.

> *Since Bengali literature has local setting, character stories, students will be interested in it and will be able to know a lot about life and solutions to different problems (T3).*

S10 expresses that Bengali literature is necessary for building morality, awareness, and for getting good job.

> *Bengali literature is necessary not only for building morality and awareness, but also for getting good job (S10).*

However, T4 remarks on the possibility of no positive output as:

> "*The benefit would be very little as one or two semester is hardly enough to have absolute conception about Bengali literature" (T4).*

Discussion

The end of the World War II is greatly marked by the end of Colonialism. With collective great struggle the Post-colonial countries achieved freedom from the British colonization. The attempts, which had been made by the people of the post-colonial countries to shade off the influence of British colonialism in many aspects of national lives in order to uphold their national and cultural identity, are still an ongoing process. Unfortunately, despite great endeavor, imperialism has emerged in many post-colonial countries including Bangladesh taking new shapes and forms. Now imperialism seems to be dominating mostly in the realm of educational sectors.

Education is becoming more and more available day by day to the people of Bangladesh with the development of the country. In the era of globalization, we are indeed being benefitted by studying English language academically; but the over-centralized study of English in academy, especially in the ELL departments at university level, make learners confined solely to the knowledge of English literature and other literatures in translation more than their own literature in its own form. Figure.1 (see 4.1.1) shows that the ELL Department mainly focuses on teaching the students about English literature along with Greek and Latin translations and with some of post-colonial studies without including Bengali literature with it, so the students are lacking in terms of knowledge on their own literary pieces. Therefore, the students face a lot of problems in absence of the study of Bangla literature. They are forgetting the Bangla diction, spelling, phrases, which is required for a skilled writing and speaking ability (see 4.2.1.3).

In this regard, Islam (2016), from English department of Dhaka University, asserts: " There is no discipline in the thought of a nation when there is no discipline in their language". His observation on the present generation is: " A large number of our young generation is failing to express their thought in an organized way (…) Many of the debaters from Dhaka university also possess the weakness not to express a full sentence correctly. If a student of 18-19 years old is not eloquent not only in English but also in Bangla then it is not a wonder anymore; rather, this wonder transforms into a terror" (p. 10, translated from Bengali by the present researchers)

This gap in learners' knowledge is allowing them to disvalue their national literary pieces. Hence, they find Bengali literary pieces very poor in quality and pay a neglecting outlook to them. This current condition has been identified as a failure of our nation by language movement activist Ahmed Rafiq. According to him (as cited in Roy, 2016), colonial legacy still has an invisible influence on us, and so, we still consider English as a supreme language. Hence, it should be mentioned that whenever the people in the present generation are asked of Bengali literature, most of them boastfully reply—"I do not read Bangla novels" (cited in Hasan and Rahaman, p. 20). Such negligence is the indication that the current generation is suffering from cultural and identity crisis.

Academically English language is the focal point in Bangladesh, therefore Bengali is now in a state of threat. Observing this threatened position of Bengali, Roy (2016) asserts in his newspaper article titled *Language in Daily Life* that careless practice of Bangla language in different Medias, for instance, TV programs titled "Dhamaka" and "Kopa Shamsu!"; vulnerable use of Bengali language in Fm radio station, etc. are changing the pattern of Bangla language in an alarming rate. Similarly, meanings of words like 'odvut' or 'jotil' are being used to mean something totally different.

From the above discussion, it appears at the implication of our literature in the university education, especially in the Department of ELL, seems to be a crying need; an attempt to establish one's own root and originality, especially in such nation like Bangladesh which is suffering from external literary force despite having a historical background of shedding blood for the sake of language. Moreover, teaching and learning others' literary pieces ignoring one's own is a sign of disrespect towards mother-tongue. Thus, a nation should not make itself confined in specific literature studies. In this regard Askari (2015) expresses his observation in a newspaper article, titled: *Save Bangla language from corruption*: "We are not against any language. Every language has its own importance (…) There is no contradiction between Bengali and English. Bengali is our sweet home, and English is our world" (Paragraph no. 12)! In support of the discussion, the survey results of the Figure no.2 (see 4.1.2) show that most of the participants support in favor of integrating Bengali literature in English Studies and similarly Figure no.3 and 4 (see 4.1.3 and 4.1.4) show the majority participants' support the integration of Bengali Literature in the English Departments in Bengali language rather than English translation. So, on the basis of the survey, it seems to us that the study of Bengali literature along with English pieces can increase awareness about own socio-cultural identity and this is an effective step to decolonize the English studies of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Using a Mixed-Method Approach, this study aimed at exploring the perceptions of the tertiary level teachers and students about the decolonization of English studies in Bangladesh by including Bengali literature in English curricula.

The findings of the study have exposed that, there is a scope for integrating Bengali literature in original language format into English departments in Bangladesh. Most respondents in this study reported that if Bengali literature is integrated within English Study programs at tertiary level in Bangladesh, they will

benefit the students. Finally, this paper ends with recommendations for further research in the other English departments in Bangladesh to analyze the need for accelerating the process of decolonizing English Study nationally, the procedure of integrating the study of Bengali literature within English departments and its effective teaching methodology in the tertiary level classroom.

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Appendix-1

(Questionnaire for Students)

Date:

Dear Fellow Learner,

Assalamualaikum.

Hope you are hale and hearty and doing well.

We feel privileged to request you to respond to a questionnaire consisting of two sections which is meant for collecting data for a research work titled "Decolonizing English Studies in Bangladesh and Integrating Bengali Literature into English Language and Literature Education at Tertiary Level: A Case Study".

We believe you might require not more than 15-20 minutes to complete this questionnaire. We would like to assure you that the data collected by this questionnaire would be used only for the research purpose and would be kept confidential.

We would highly appreciate your spending a few moments from your precious time.

Kind regards,

Kohinoor Akther
N121292
8th semester, Section B
ELL, IIUC

Sofia Siddiqua
N123234
7th semester, Section A
ELL, IIUC

Personal Information

Please fill in the blanks

Personal Information

a	Name:	
b	Name of institution:	
c	Please indicate your academic designation with CGPA:	
d	Please mention your School and High- school background	

Close- Ended Questions

Please put a tick on your answer option

1. I have more knowledge of Bengali literature than English Literature.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

2. I have more knowledge of English literature than Bengali Literature.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

3. The study of Bengali literature should be included in the university curricula along with Greek and Latin, Arabic in Translation and African and European Literature as a way of decolonization

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

4. Bangla Literature should be taught in the university level in English Translation.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

5. Bangla Literature should be taught in the university level in Bengali language.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

Open- Ended Questions

Please Write Down Your Opinion

1. What problems (if there is any) are the students of ELL facing without the study of any course related to mother tongue literature?

2. How the students would be benefitted if the study of Bengali literature along with English studies is integrated in the department of ELL?

THANK YOU

Appendix-2

(Questionnaire for Teachers)

Date:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Assalamualaikum.

Hope you are hale and hearty and doing well.

We feel privileged to request you to respond to a questionnaire consisting of two sections which is meant for collecting data for a research work titled "Decolonizing English Studies in Bangladesh and Integrating Bengali Literature into English Language and Literature Education at Tertiary Level: A Case Study".

We believe you might require not more than 15-20 minutes to complete this questionnaire. We would like to assure you that the data collected by this questionnaire would be used only for the research purpose and would be kept confidential.

We would highly appreciate your spending a few moments from your precious time.

Kind regards,

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N123234
7th semester, Section A
ELL, IIUC

Personal Information

Please fill in the blanks

a	Name:	
b	Name of institution:	
c	Please indicate your academic designation:	

Close- Ended Questions

Please put a tick on your answer option

1. The study of Bengali literature should be included in the university curricula along with Greek and Latin, Arabic in Translation and African and European Literature as a way of decolonization

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

2. Bangla Literature should be taught in the university level in English Translation.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

3. Bangla Literature should be taught in the university level in Bengali language.

a. Strongly agree b. Agree c. Disagree d. Strongly disagree e. Neutral

Open- Ended Questions

Please Write Down Your Opinion

1. What problems (if there is any) are the students of ELL facing without the study of any course related to mother tongue literature?

2. How the students would be benefitted if the study of Bengali literature along with English studies is integrated in the department of ELL?

THANK YOU