The issue of English education in Bangladesh, with all its ramifications, has been a subject of never-ending debates and discussions for long. Eyebrows from all quarters have remained raised over the alleged decline in the standard of English. The term ‘standard of English’, however, has been ambiguously over-generalized by almost everyone, thus specifying nothing at all. Still, we may get an understanding of it from the following events.

For example, people point their fingers at the standard of English seen in Civil Service Examination scripts, SSC/HSC examination answer sheets, administrative paper work and documents, job interviews and so on. The ‘types’ and ‘uses’ of English in all these sectors are obviously different. Yet, when one generalizes the issue, it may be assumed that the declining standard relates to the poor quality of written English, and in some cases of spoken English.

Therefore, the focus of all attention is on the school level where English is being taught as a compulsory subject right from class one. In regard to this fact, there is an overall agreement that the quality of English education imparted in the secondary schools is deplorably poor.

Consequently, there have been a series of investigations through task forces, commissions, conferences and seminars. But the scenario has not improved much. Till now, there does not exist any language policy in Bangladesh concerning Bangla, the mother tongue (MT) and English. And this lack of a language policy has, according to numerous educationists, led to the ills of our educational system.

Because of the absence of such a language policy, the exact status of English in the curriculum could never be defined, and no proper language teaching-learning strategies could be formulated as regards the socio-economic-cultural context, in accordance with the needs of public.

As a result, a confusing state prevails in the broader domain of national life. On the one hand, Bangla is constitutionally operating as the medium of governmental, administrative and judicial activities, and on the other, globalization and rapid increase of cyber network have propelled English into the role of key-player in private and semi-government domains.
Side by side, the historical ‘myth’--that English is synonymous with power, prestige and wealth--has increasingly prevailed in public mind. Hence, despite its functioning as the ‘subject of horror’ in the school curriculum, English has not allowed the learners to forget that whatever they might achieve in future would be possible only through the knowledge of and proficiency in English. And herein lies the nature of public attitude toward English.

Considering the various contradictory facets regarding the high profile teaching and learning of English at the secondary and higher secondary levels, and the low profile outcome and achievement of the students, the obscurity of the scenario is evident. We need to educate all our citizens but we do not have the resources. So we have to activate these limited resources in order to ensure the best possible output. Since Bangla and English have their respective important roles to play in this regard, we must find out ways to manipulate the teaching-learning strategies of these languages in an effective way so that on the one hand, they turn out to be valuable resources and benefit the majority, and on the other, the management of the language education can be cost effective.

Therefore, time has come to brush aside all our armchair approaches toward the ‘English issue’. We must now find answers to questions like: who needs and who does not need English in Bangladesh and why? What type of English should be taught to those who really need English? What should be the ideal level at which English can be safely introduced in the curriculum? And, do we at all require the ‘cultural English’ that has been existing?

We also need to dwell on such issues as: how far has the cultural English helped the half-starved majority of Bangladeshis to survive? And why should we expect the majority to ‘gain something’ from this cultural English which they would never be able to use anywhere? How ethical is it to go on teaching English to so many children and thus encourage them to believe that it would automatically entitle them to better jobs, if not luxurious jobs? How many jobs are there? And do they all want these jobs? How far is it honest and moral for our educational management gurus to pretend that learning English is a passport or an entry visa to so-called bright future? Why should the enormous wastage of resources, time and energy perpetuate with regard to ELT at the earliest levels of our learners’ academic career? Why cannot we think of educating the majority in MT and thus making them
knowledgeable in all subjects at the preliminary stage, and then make them attain proficiency in functional English according to their specific needs and objectives?

These questions have been raised by a good number of educationists and thinkers over the years. The answers are not at all hard to find if sincerity of intention and zeal of patriotism are there. It needs just a farsighted decision to go in for the right set of activities.

Unfortunately, in a country like Bangladesh where a minority of extremely powerful and influential people controls the social, educational, economic and political arenas, righteousness and exactness seem to be archaic words. The governments and the administrative elites have never been accountable to anyone for whatever they have been doing. So even if the text books of various subjects do no reach the students after four months of the beginning of their academic session, nobody is answerable to anyone. While the students have been left tormented at the receiving end, the public has remained a hapless spectator. Never have been public attitudes related to crucial educational aspects taken into account by the policy makers of the government.

This study is a humble effort to investigate and analyse the public attitudes with respect to our ‘English issue’ in particular and our ‘education issue’ in general. Despite the fact that attitudes do not remain static and they vary according to context and time, the public opinions that have come into fore in this study should be fair enough indicators of current scenario—given the small difference of time between the survey period and the submission of this thesis.

And, regardless of its ‘value’ or ‘relevance’ or ‘significance’ to our policy makers, this study would hopefully throw some light on the existing realities and try to find out positive solutions.
Note:

1. The problem of new textbooks in the beginning of the academic year has occurred several times before. However, this year it has been acute. According to all Bangladeshi newspaper reports, till April 2001, new textbooks have not come to the markets, creating enormous suffering for students. The academic session began in January. As a result of this, students and teachers had to rely on old textbooks. In many cases, teaching continued on the basis of guidebooks without any textbooks.