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# A journey to the centre' – exploring action research to explain my emerging living-educational-theory and empower local practitioners in policy and practice in Bangladesh.

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## Abstract

This paper looks at a study conducted in Bangladesh for my doctoral research with teachers against a backdrop of policy level introduction of communicative approach to English Language Teaching and dissatisfaction of different stakeholders, particularly teachers, with curricular reform that was not resulting in learners' 'increased proficiency'. A key reason typically given was 'teacher resistance'; teachers' perceived unwillingness to incorporate communicative principles in their teaching. Despite considerable consensus about the efficacy of teacher-research what practitioners from postcolonial communities actually say, think or believe about this and the influence on practice of teachers engaging in teacher-research has remained considerably under-reported. I therefore instigated a project to examine whether collaborative research promoted a better understanding of teachers' own beliefs and policy level changes, and empowered them to make informed choices and devise context-sensitive pedagogies in their unique teaching-learning contexts.

The process of initiating and facilitating collaborative research with colleagues led me to critically reflect on my own beliefs, practices and lived experiences as an ELT practitioner which, while largely shaping my embodied values has hitherto remained implicit. Through critically reflecting on my professional journey I clarify my previously unarticulated values and create my living-educational-theory. I conclude with how I am trying to enhance my educational influence in the learning of social formations, such as the private university I worked for and the Bangladesh government, with recommendations that emerged from my research.

**Keywords: English language teaching; Postcolonial; Non-native English speaking teachers; Teacher research; Communicative language teaching; Action Research**

## 1. Introduction

This paper stems from my 25-year experience as an English language teaching (ELT) professional and researcher from a postcolonial context. Following general dissatisfaction with the capacity of the prevailing state of English education to produce competent learners in an increasingly competitive global market and to develop its human capital, the government of Bangladesh, a small developing country in South-east Asia, introduced major policy reforms in its English curriculum. These reforms represented a typical example of knowledge-transfer from the 'centre' (the technologically advanced communities of the West, particularly 'native English' communities) to 'periphery' contexts. This took place especially in less developed communities where English is of postcolonial-currency (Canagarajah 1999, p.4). It entailed a 'radical departure' from the prevalent grammar-translation mode to a communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) in the curriculum (Chowdhury and Farooqui 2011, p.150). Predictably, since its introduction two decades ago, there have been consistent reports of the incommensurability of CLT with local contexts from different stakeholders, especially from practitioners. Such observations from practitioners have, however, typically been relegated to 'teacher resistance' – teachers' unwillingness to implement the new method and change their practices. The situation is not unique to Bangladesh, as the issue of mismatch between CLT and local contexts has been widely documented in ELT literature from diverse contexts (see Butler, 2011).

It is this tension between policy reforms and the so-called resistance of practitioners to apply it, that I seek to understand in the present paper. The success of any policy depends on those who are at the forefront of implementing it. However, until recently, teacher opinion and knowledge in ELT have mostly been ignored as having limited relevance to broader policy changes. I therefore initiated a collaborative project with my colleagues at a private university in Bangladesh to explore the feasibility of teacher research in empowering local practitioners to make their voices heard in policy and practice in a concerted way, in order to minimize the long-standing gap between the two in my context.

The following is my attempt to explain my educational influence in learning and practice and create an account of my hitherto implicit living-educational-theory (living-theory) drawing on insights from my own professional journey and this project. The process of critically reflecting on my progression from novice ELT practitioner to teacher-researcher has elucidated my embodied values. I strongly believe that ELT practitioners, especially Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (henceforth, NNESTs) should make their voices heard in practice and policy as local experts. This would enable local practitioners to stand equitably in a profession that is still very much dominated by the divisive ideology of 'native-speaker (NS) ideals'. As an ELT educator, striving for this goal is my purpose.

Looking at my practice through the lens of Living Educational Theory research has also made me realize the evolving nature and centrality of my implicit values in shaping my identity and practice. They form the explanatory principles and standards of judgment, which guide my practice. It is through my embodied values that I have attempted to explain my educational influence in my own learning and the learning of my colleagues at a private university and evaluated improvements in our practices, and the knowledge-creation in this paper. The process of articulating my values has also made me realize my 'living

contradictions' when these have been negated in practice, and in my struggle to overcome the experience of these negations by taking agency to improve them.

Before describing my introduction to CLT and how my pursuit to understand it and improve practice has shaped my subsequent professional journey, it is important to understand the sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts of my study. As this paper is based on my personal narrative, I use an informal voice.

## 2. Context of the Study

Bangladesh is a small, Muslim-majority country in South-east Asia. It is densely populated with over 160 million people living in a land area marginally bigger than New York State. While it has made notable progress in reducing poverty and malnutrition, the young nation state is beset with significant problems with 30% people living below the poverty line, political instability and social inequality. Only 2.2% of the country's GDP is allocated to the educational sector, resulting in a general literacy rate of 50% and an adult literacy rate of 20%.

Socio-linguistically, Bangladesh is predominantly monolingual, with the majority (98.8%) of the population (BBS 2011) using Bangla (aka Bengali) as the main medium of communication. Following an intense language-based movement in 1952 against the imposition of Urdu as the state language, Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. Bangla therefore, continues to play a pivotal role in unifying the nation and its national identity, resulting in "irreconcilable fractures in formulating unproblematic language policies in the country" (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014, p. 2).

With over 30 million students studying English as a compulsory subject from grade 1 to pre-university level in the three main streams of education – secular, madrassa (religious) and English – the country now has one of the largest English language learning populations in the world (Hamid and Erling 2016). The medium of instruction (MOI) in the public sector (secular and madrassa) is primarily Bangla and English for the privately run English-medium schools. Only about 4% of the 17–23 age group cohort students have access to tertiary education in Bangladesh (UNESCO-IBE 2006/07). Tertiary level higher education (HE) is divided into the public and private sectors with all private universities using English as MOI (University Grants Commission 2011). Entry to all public and select private universities is result-oriented and highly competitive.

## 3. The Policy Reform

In post-independence Bangladesh (1971) English was given a 'diminished role' (Hamid and Baldauf 2008, p. 19) in both national and public spheres, and Bangla became the MOI of higher education. However, amidst a growing recognition of its instrumental role globally, for international relations, business and communications and rising concerns following reports on its declining standard at all levels, English was reinstated in policy as a compulsory subject from grade 1 in 1991, and for undergraduates at tertiary level across the country (*ibid.*).

Traditionally, the GTM (Grammar-Translation Method) had been the prevalent mode for English teaching at all levels in Bangladesh, with the focus on grammar and accuracy

involving rote learning of grammatical rules, vocabulary, translating mostly detached sentences and written exercises (Chowdhury and Farooqui 2011). Since speaking and listening were not tested in examinations, they were largely ignored in teaching and learning. Based on reports of the inadequacy of the existing curriculum in developing learners' skills, the Education Ministry introduced CLT in the curriculum in phases starting from Year 6 in 1996 up to year 12. In 2000 the final phase of CLT was implemented with the introduction of CLT-based textbooks for Secondary (Years 9–10) and Higher Secondary (HS) (Years 11–12) levels by ELTIP (English Language Teaching Improvement Project) – a joint project by the Bangladesh government in collaboration with the Department for International Development (DFID), UK. ELTIP provided Secondary and Higher Secondary teachers with 1–10 days training for teaching English in the recommended method (National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) 2001, 2003). It also aimed to revise the examination system completely, so that learners' ability to use English for communicative purposes would replace the previous system of assessing formal knowledge of language structures – a change that is yet to materialize.

Broadly based on theories of communicative competence and second language learning, CLT is a learner-centred approach, which emphasizes facilitating learners' communicative competence through social interactions in real-life situations, for example, small group and pair activities, as opposed to focusing primarily on linguistic forms (Richards and Rogers, 2014). Unlike the teacher-centred classrooms in GTM, the teacher's role in CLT is less dominant and varies from facilitator, co-communicator and organizer, to a manager of learning (Richards and Rogers, 2014). The theoretical broadness of CLT has led to strong and weak versions of the approach. The strong version maintains that, since language learning is a natural process, learners will learn by self-analyzing the input, with teachers facilitating this process. Holding the same objective, CLT's weak version envisions a more active role for teachers by introducing structured and meaningful activities in a controlled manner with learners gradually and autonomously learning to use the language in a meaningful way (Klapper 2003). In Bangladesh, the sudden policy-reform without proper teacher-training has led to adoption of a strong version of CLT in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with the prevalent conception among practitioners that CLT prioritizes fluency over accuracy.

## 4. The Policy-practice Divide in HE

Although there is no prescribed method for ELT at Higher Education (HE), the policy reform has led to a greater emphasis on skills-based courses and interactive classes in both public and private sectors, with practitioners claiming to have adopted CLT method in their teaching (Chowdhury 2003). In reality ELT in Bangladesh has not moved away from its subject orientation, with most practitioners following either the traditional GTM or an 'eclectic method' by combining GTM and CLT. The general requirement for becoming an English teacher at higher secondary and tertiary levels is at minimum a 2nd class Master's degree in English. After completing their degrees, graduates become teachers and, regardless of their literature or linguistic backgrounds, can teach language courses. The dearth of training and proper infrastructure, teacher skills and expertise, large classes (average 80–100+ students) and logistics all pose a huge challenge for ELT in Bangladesh

(Ahmed 2014). Faced with methodological innovations like CLT, teachers at all levels feel challenged and ill-equipped to deal with such changes.

At tertiary level, especially private universities, learners are under considerable pressure to use English, and they struggle to cope with their courses, irrespective of their rural or urban backgrounds. Although most universities offer Foundation English course(s) – commonly known as service courses – to help learners with their English skills at the first-degree level, most find the shift from traditional, lecture-based classes to skills-based courses challenging, and benefit little from them. The service courses are typically academic writing courses which assess accuracy rather than learners' communicative competence. Combined with the heavily examination-centred educational system, there is a mismatch between policy directives and the actual uptake of CLT by practitioners at HE.

It is this policy-practice gap that motivated me to explore whether doing teacher research (TR) would enable practitioners to integrate top-down changes better with their practices in my context. The next section describes my educational development and how the policy reform influenced the trajectory of my professional journey.

## 5. The Circuitous Route of my Professional Journey

I begin by recounting my experience as a novice teacher and how my practice and lived experiences shaped the values that form my living standards of judgment and my decision-making as an educator. I strongly believe in equity and the empowerment of all ELT practitioners, especially NNESTs as frontline policy-implementers and local experts to have voice and agency in policy and practice in their own right. Since the emergence and evolution of my teaching philosophy and present values were not straightforward, their meanings can only be understood as they unfold in my practice described below.

### a. Early Years

I started my career as an ELT practitioner at a college (Years 11–12) in 1994 after finishing a Master's degree in English Literature. Typically, I entered the profession without any teacher-training and started teaching English as a subject in the same grammar-translation method I myself was taught. The curriculum, materials and methods up to Higher Secondary level mandated by the education ministry were generally imported from the 'West' or designed by west-trained 'local experts', which teachers implemented in their teaching. At that time my teaching philosophy was fairly simple. Based on Confucian-heritage culture like other countries in the region, the educational culture in Bangladesh is primarily one of unquestioned obedience of learner to teacher, who is viewed as 'the fount of knowledge' (Chowdhury, 2003). Garnered primarily from family and my own learning, I viewed education as a noble, emancipatory and enlightening endeavour where my prime duty as teacher was to educate pupils to help reach their potential, that is, acquiring proficiency in an L2 in this case. I therefore carried out my role as a passive implementer of the curriculum and it did not occur to me to question the *status quo.* As a non-native speaker (NNS) of English and without any background in language teaching or curriculum development, I neither felt qualified to question policy directives, nor was I critically aware of the politics of ELT. I rather naively viewed education in general and ELT in particular as

apolitical and neutral, rather than the value-laden practices that I later found them actually to be.

### b. Introduction to CLT

It was my introduction to CLT and my experience of applying it in practice that led me to question the imposition of top-down reforms on teachers and their role in implementing these changes. CLT was introduced in Bangladesh from Year 6 to Year 12 in phases. I was in the 6th year of my teaching career and had just switched jobs from college to a private university when the final phase of CLT was implemented. Following its introduction to school settings, most HE institutions, especially private universities, adopted CLT in curricula. At my university, new materials were introduced in the service courses to promote learners' functional skills. Lecturers were instructed by the English department to switch from traditional lectures to teach communicatively, although they were provided with little support by way of training or guidance. Accordingly, I attempted to make my undergraduate classes interactive but, coming from a literature background like most of my colleagues, I lacked any prior orientation or training on CLT. I only had vague concepts of what teaching-learning in a CLT method entailed (interactive classes, pair and group work, using 'English only' as MOI and so on) mostly garnered from departmental meetings, colleagues and the scant resources (journals and articles) available. Switching from a grammar-translation method to interactive classes, I relegated my failure to implement CLT primarily to my literature background and my lack of training and knowhow of ELT in general and CLT in particular. I therefore decided to undertake a Master's degree in ELT and Applied Linguistics (AL) to gain a better understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of L2 teaching and learning. My MA thesis explored teaching language through literature in an integrated way, bridging my literature and linguistics backgrounds. After completing my degree from the UK, I returned to Bangladesh in 2005, confident and armed with new knowledge.

### c. CLT and the Issue of Cultural Disillusionment

Upon my return I joined a different private university and though I now had a better theoretical understanding of CLT – for example, why interactive classes, or pair/group works were conducive to L2 learning – implementing them in my classes did not meet with much success. At the university, despite having smaller class sizes with 30-40+ students compared to 80+ students at public universities, I found learners unwilling to engage in communicative activities such as peer-correction, whole-class, group and/or pair discussions. At that time the question of CLT's unsuitability to my context did not occur to me. Upon researching why I was struggling to apply it in practice, I came across Chowdhury's (2003) study on the general incommensurability of CLT in ELT, particularly in the foreign language (EFL) context of Bangladesh and the resultant cultural disillusionment of both learners and teachers. Pointing to the prevalent teacher-centred educational culture in Bangladesh as opposed to the learner-centeredness of CLT, he argues for maintaining cultural continuity in adopting western methods and situating ELT in postcolonial frameworks in such contexts. My subsequent research came up with reports from diverse contexts on the difficulty of implementing CLT. I realized the issue was more complex than simply a methodological one, and my failure to apply CLT in practice was not due to any resistance and/or deficit on my part.

After CLT's introduction at higher secondary and tertiary level, I often heard many experienced colleagues debating why it would not work in Bangladesh. It was much later, while struggling to fit this western method developed in a context far removed from my own teaching-learning realities that I could relate to many of these observations. I was dismayed realizing how the rich repository of knowledge that local practitioners have of their own contexts and learners are mostly ignored and eventually lost. There is no concerted and systematic attempt to keep records and to utilize these experiences and insights that could have otherwise informed practice and policy, leading to a much better integration between the two. I also discovered that, aside from pursuing traditional research, which remains far removed from the everyday realities and concerns of teachers and poses huge challenge for most, practitioners have little room to make their voices heard in academia.

The introduction of CLT in Bangladesh was, therefore, an eye-opening experience as I realized that despite hugely influencing our immediate practices and professional lives in the long term, we teachers, as frontline policy implementers actually have very little, if any say at all in policy making and/or policy changes! The situation though, is not unique to Bangladesh. Teachers are rarely consulted on policy directives, despite having in-depth and firsthand knowledge of learner needs and their contexts. Traditionally, teacher knowledge is often dismissed as parochial and irrelevant beyond immediate classroom contexts because of its tacit, subjective and anecdotal nature (Borg 2009; Canagarajah 2005). I therefore decided to explore ways in which teacher knowledge, including mine, could be validated, so we could have our say in educational decision makings and reforms which directly influence our professional practices, identity and confidence as ELT practitioners, especially in 'periphery' contexts.

### d. The Quest for Improving my Practice

Reflecting on my educational practice, I now clearly see myself existing as a 'living contradiction', where the imposition of centrally mandated policy reform and my struggle to implement it negated my values of teaching as an emancipatory and enlightening endeavour. It is this tension between policy and practice that propelled me to take agency and seek out ways to empower teachers so that they could express their subjective knowledge systematically and validate the wealth of experience they possess to voice their opinions on policy directives in an informed manner, thereby ensuring equity in the profession. My present values of equity and empowerment of ELT practitioners, however, took a long time to evolve and it is upon reflecting on my experience that I am finally comprehending how they came about and their full import in shaping my identity and subsequent practice.

Coming from a postcolonial setting I was vaguely aware of the politics of ELT and how English was imposed on the undivided British India by Macaulay's infamous Minute on Education (1835). Predictably, since the colonial era the established practice in 'periphery' contexts has been to either import ELT materials and methods from the centre, or have them designed by west-trained local practitioners. I knew that I was disadvantaged in the profession due to my non-nativeness and accepted the status quo like so many ELT practitioners before and after me. It was to this perception of the self as deficient and my lack of linguistics background that I ascribed my failure to implement CLT, and decided to pursue an MA to gain a better understanding of both ELT and CLT. Near the end of my

course, I came across Phillipson's (1992) influential and controversial work on the politics of ELT, linguistic imperialism and western hegemony, which made me realize that education was not the innocent process I had assumed. On my MA supervisor's recommendation I read Canagarajah's (1999) critique of Phillipson's work on the agency and appropriation of NNS in marginalized, 'periphery' communities like his native Sri Lanka. These two works led me to view ELT from a critical perspective, instead of adopting a broad-brush approach of language learning as a value-free phenomenon, especially in postcolonial contexts like mine. Although, theoretically, I was hugely influenced by these works, they had little bearing on my practice. Upon returning to Bangladesh, I was optimistic and confident that I could now better integrate the policy reform with my practice. However, when my efforts to implement CLT in university classes met with little success, I began questioning my practice, although I still adhered to a deficit-model of myself *i.e*. I was failing to apply CLT due to some personal or pedagogical shortfalls.

### e. Connecting the Dots

A few years later I came across Kumaravadivelu's (1994; 2006) work on postmethod condition where he put forth a strong argument for moving beyond methods in ELT. He argued that the one-size-fits-all solution offered by western methodologies fails to address the complex issues of L2 teaching-learning in the widely varied contexts they are applied to. The realities of these contexts are very different from the 'ideal' teaching-learning situations of the West for which these methods were originally devised. He stressed the need for local teachers as central agents of policy implementation to think creatively about devising location-specific pedagogies and methods for their unique settings. Kumaravadivelu's works were particularly illuminating, making me rethink about CLT and my practice. Further research showed reports from diverse contexts, attesting to the incommensurability of CLT or any other method in teaching-learning English (Butler 2011; Holliday 2005). I realized the issue of CLT not working in my context ran much deeper than some inherent deficiency in my teaching and/or unwillingness of the learners. As Fishman (1987) cautions, the prevalent image of ELT and English in much of the developing world as a 'neutral' tool, apparently unrelated to ideological issues, must not be taken "as a phenomenon that requires no further qualification" (p. 8).

In the course of my self-initiated professional development, I read a wide array of literature by postcolonial scholars, philosophers and applied linguists on how English as a colonial language of the past and *lingua franca* of the present globalized world is deeply involved in world politics, both socially and culturally, often giving it unequal status when compared to local languages and the need for teaching it as a postcolonial language (Franson and Holliday 2009). I came to know about 'Native-Speakerism' – the supposed inherent superiority of the native speakers (NS) still largely dominating ELT discourses (Holliday 2005; Kumaravadivelu 2016); and the resultant inequity in the profession marginalizing NNESTs from the very outset of their careers to the significant detriment of their expertise and confidence (Mahboob 2010). It is, therefore, important to take into account teacher cognition, that is, what teachers know, think and believe (Borg 2006) and the role of teacher identity in shaping their practices, if we are to understand their practices and want them to integrate new knowledge from teacher-training and policy reforms into their practices. I learnt about the formation of a NNEST Caucus by some professionals in 1998 within TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages), one of the largest

international professional bodies in ELT to address the inequity in ELT and its issuing of a position statement in the face of continued marginalization of the NNESTs eight years later. TESOL's official position *Against Discrimination of Nonnative Speakers of English in the field of TESOL* (2006) (http://www.tesol.org/s tesol/seccss.asp), states "all English language educators should be proficient in English regardless of their native languages" and "teaching skills, teaching experience, and professional preparation should be given as much weight as language proficiency". This is also substantiated by ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) research, which argues that, with the phenomenal spread of English as a language of inter and intranational communication, the many varieties of Englishes worldwide and the NNS outnumbering the NSs, gauging learner/speaker proficiency by NS norms instead of how effectively they can communicate is both unviable and untenable (Dewey and Leung 2010; Seidlhofer 2011).

From my research, I recognised the need for teachers to take agency for their personal and professional empowerment, though I was unsure about how to carry this out. This is when, fortuitously, I came across McNiff's (1988) *Action Research: Principles and Practice* in a local bookstore. Although, from reading on postmethod condition I had some idea about the need for local practitioners to take up classroom-based research to develop context-sensitive pedagogies, it was from McNiff's book and subsequent research (McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead 1996; Burns 2005) that I gained a clear idea about action research (AR) as a form of practitioner research for teachers' professional development. As the name suggests, AR focuses on both action and research simultaneously. While different numbers of participants could be involved in the actual action, AR is generally viewed as a collaborative process undertaken by a number of researchers (Burns 2005; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). McNiff (1988) comments on the inherently unpredictable and flexible nature of AR compared to the theory-generating, generalized approaches of other research methods. The spiral of planning, action, observation and reflection in AR moves cyclically and is applied interactively in keeping with the socio-political environment of the research context and the personal and professional backgrounds of the researchers. Since it stems from localized concerns and problems that participants face in their contexts and a need to address those problems through systematic data collection, I found AR to be appropriate for the kind of investigation I was interested in.

As such, I initiated a project with my university colleagues to explore the viability of teacher research in improving their practices. From experience, I knew the vital role that continued professional development (CPD) plays in making teachers critically reflect on their daily practices. Thus, by creatively addressing pedagogical issues in their contexts with authority and confidence, practitioners could go beyond methods which, as postcolonial scholars (Canagarajah 1999; Kumaravadivelu 2006) argue, is an essential precondition for creating localized knowledge-bases. However, while recognizing the need for creating a systematic repository of local knowledge for teachers to draw on to make their voices heard in policy and practice, I was also aware that in developing contexts like Bangladesh there is limited support for teacher-training and CPD at government and institutional levels. I realized that, unless teachers took the initiative for their own professional development, their views would remain unarticulated and unheeded in key issues such as policy changes.

By then I had applied for doctoral studies in the UK. In my thesis I explored Bangladeshi teachers' perceptions about ELT and centre-mandated CLT, and the viability of

collaborative AR in minimizing the long-standing policy-practice divide in their context. I met Jack Whitehead in my viva-board as one of the external examiners. He encouraged me to write a paper on living-educational-theory in the light of my research, and he introduced me to Marie Huxtable. The current paper is the outcome of my attempt to articulate my hither to latent and emergent living-educational-theory under their sage guidance.

Due to the limited scope of this paper and its emphasis on tracing the emergence of my living-educational-theory, I will not go into details of the AR project conducted by my colleagues. My focus is primarily on the impact of the project about generating an understanding of my practice and creating a valid explanation of my educational influence in my own learning, the learning of my colleagues and the learning of the social formations of the HE sector, which is the area I live and work in. However, before proceeding, it is important to understand the nature of the so-called resistance by teachers to policy reforms.

## 6. 'Resistance' or Resilience?

My experience narrated above illustrates that, despite investing considerable time and effort to understand and implement centre-mandated CLT in my practice, I did not meet with much success. My degree in linguistics from the West clarified my understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of L2 learning and different methods including CLT, but in practice I struggled to apply it in my context. While this would be typically interpreted as an unwillingness or resistance to policy reform, the issue is much more complex.

The challenges of implementing curricular innovations and/or transforming knowledge through training into practice for teachers is well documented in ELT. Studies on both pre-service and in-service training, for example, highlight the exceptional difficulty involved in changing teachers' practices through training courses (Lamb 1995; Borg 2006), a phenomenon frequently labeled as teacher 'resistance' (Hayes 2000). Resistance to change can be defined as an affective, cognitive and behavioural response to maintaining the *status quo* with hopes of stopping, stalling or altering the proposed change (Berkovich 2011). Research on management and educational reforms posit that the key factors in teachers' 'resistance' to change consist of differences in value, disagreement on issues that need to be addressed, an inability to implement proposed reforms locally and differences in interests between employees and administration/management (Baum 2002). Any process of reform or change usually triggers feelings of uncertainty and is often viewed by practitioners as questioning their professional competence and identity (Terhart 2013).

Research on teacher-cognition, that is, what teachers know, think and believe (Borg 2006) and Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE), strongly support viewing teachers' knowledge holistically and from a sociocultural perspective (Johnson and Golombek 2011, p. 3). It is argued that teacher beliefs developed over time act as a lens shaping their perceptions of the world, even during training for professional development (Borg 2006). Such trainings often require teacher-learners to assume new identities and change their mindsets; this is a difficult undertaking, more so for NNESTs, due to the innate struggles they undergo in taking on new discourses and practices along with a sense of 'inadequate language knowledge'. All of these negatively affect their confidence and performance (Kumaravadivelu 2016).

Teachers' attitudes to any educational reform or innovation, therefore, have important implications for language-planning and policy (LPP) initiatives. As the ultimate policy enactors in micro (institutional) contexts, the actual implementation of any educational reform greatly depends on how teachers interpret it. My experience of applying CLT in practice illustrates that what would have been typically misconstrued as my 'resistance' to policy innovation was anything but. It took me years of self-study and research to reach the conclusion that it was not some deficiency in my understanding and practice as a NNEST but contextual incompatibility that made applying CLT difficult in my context.

However, in reality, without institutional and/or government support, it is difficult for most practitioners to seek answers to pedagogical issues they face in practice through independent research. In current literature, from postcolonial studies, teacher-cognition, *i.e*. SLTE, ELF to TR, there is an increasing emphasis on teachers taking a more central role in their practice, becoming active in research and devising context-sensitive pedagogies. Questions arise from this. How willing, confident and ready are practitioners (especially in 'periphery' contexts) to undertake a radical role-reversal from being passive consumers of other people's research to becoming active researchers and theorizers? How viable is such an undertaking for these practitioners in terms of the considerable investment of time, energy and money required on top of their other academic, administrative, professional and personal commitments? Moreover, even if teachers manage to engage in research, enabling their findings to conform to standardized research criteria, such as validity, rigour and generalizability, so they will not simply be dismissed as informal reflections and/or activities, as well as then disseminating them in the accepted format (conference presentations; getting published in academic journals) – all these pose huge challenges for them.

Sustaining motivation for such undertakings and attempting to create a knowledge-base on top of their existing workload would thus require a Herculean effort from these practitioners! I seek answers to these questions through the AR project I initiated with colleagues, by exploring their perceptions of research and the feasibility of actually conducting teacher-research in their context. I also look at how the dialogical process of facilitating AR has helped imbibe my own living-educational-theory. The next section provides a brief overview of the project.

## 7. The Project

The 12-month AR project was conducted at a private university in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The project's objective was twofold – first, exploring how local teachers integrated policy reforms with their existing practices; secondly, investigating whether doing collaborative teacher research on a pedagogical issue relevant to them, and devising solutions for it, would enable these practitioners to make informed choices on what works in their context. It was assumed that conducting research would allow these practitioners to voice their opinions on top-down changes with confidence, leading to better policy-practice integration where possible, as well as dispelling assumptions that research is generally statistical and quantitative – hence a daunting prospect.

The three teacher-participants were female, aged 29–35, each having 3–11 years' experience of teaching English. All work at the same institution. All were educated at

universities in Bangladesh. Two of them had MAs in literature and one in ELT and Applied Linguistics. Irrespective of their backgrounds, all three have been teaching language courses since the beginning of their careers. The literature majors had received some in-service training ranging from 3 days to 3 months in CLT, whereas the language major did not receive any training.

None of the participants was acquainted with AR (only one had heard of it) or collaborative research before the project. Initially they expressed reservations about committing to the project and cited a heavy workload and little or no experience of doing research; they were understandably concerned about running a project independently. I proposed acting as a guide and facilitator to support them, and they consented to join the project. Keeping with the democratic and emancipatory principles of AR and my educational values, we agreed that participants would be in full control of the project. For the purpose of confidentiality, identities of the participants and the institutions remain anonymous.

For their research, the participants decided to investigate the mismatch between what they perceived as CLT's emphasis on fluency as opposed to the service courses' emphasis on accuracy in academic writing. This posed a major challenge for learners and created conspicuous tension in their practice. They decided to use CLT's inductive approach to grammar teaching by making learners infer underlying grammar rules through pair/group and/or whole class activities in two courses offering basic and advanced English. So far, they had been using an eclectic approach (combination of GTM and CLT) in their classes. It is important to mention here that my focus was primarily on exploring participants' beliefs and experiences of doing AR rather than on learners or learning outcomes. However, given the inherently learner-centred and dialectical nature of classroom teaching, participants' assessment and opinions of AR were typically based on the performance of learners in class and examinations.

I adopted a multi-method, case study approach within the qualitative research paradigm for collecting data on teacher cognition and their experience of doing collaborative research on top-down curricular reforms. The process of data-collection and data-analysis was cyclical and iterative. The next section describes how my experience of managing the project facilitated an understanding of my embodied values and my emergent living-educational-theory, albeit obliquely.

## 8. The Dialogical Process of my Emerging living-educational-theory

The participant-focused nature of my doctoral study left little scope to reflect on my practice and the implicit values that influenced me as a teacher-researcher, though in many instances I could draw parallels between my own and the participants' experiences. It is through the act of consciously retracing my professional journey as an ELT practitioner to explain my living-educational-theory that I have become aware of how facilitating the research project has made me relive past experiences and rethink my practice. Corresponding regularly via email, answering queries, seeking clarification on responses, collecting and interpreting data constituted an ongoing interactive and dialogical process between participants' accounts and my own lived experiences, obliquely shedding critical light on issues whose import I had not realized earlier. Thus, placing the 'living I' in the

centre of the collaborative Action Research (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002) as well as reflecting on my practice have enabled a greater understanding of my values and of my living-eduational-theory. The common patterns in our experiences thus shed significant light on the implications of practitioners becoming involved in research in 'periphery' contexts like Bangladesh.

### a) Recognising Myself as a Living Contradiction

Looking at my 25-year professional journey from a novice ELT practitioner to a teacher-researcher today through the lens of Living Educational Theory research, I now recognise that my motivation to undertake research and improve my practice stemmed from the negation of my values, which were largely tacit and unstructured at the time. As noted earlier, when I began my career I had a vague notion of the general efficacy of education as a noble, emancipatory and enlightening endeavor. It was experiencing the negation of these values with the imposition of centre-mandated curricular reform and my ongoing struggle to implement it in my classes, despite obvious contextual mismatches, that led to questioning my practice and exploring possibilities to improve it through action-reflection cycles. Even though I did not realize its significance or how to describe it then, I now see my living contradiction in holding certain values on the one hand yet denying them in practice on the other.

For example, in 2000 when Bangladeshi universities adopted CLT into their curricula, although I was new in the HE sector and had no prior orientation, I intuitively knew that certain aspects of CLT (pair work, peer correction, interactive and learner-centred classes, for example) would not fit well within the sociocultural context of Bangladesh where learners are expected to be obedient and respectful to teachers and speak only when spoken to. Hence at university when they come across the more communicative approaches to language-teaching for the first time, "students feel tempted to discard the new style" (Chowdhury 2003, p. 284). In such situations, making them interact in class poses considerable challenges for teachers, let alone doing communicative language activities. Nevertheless, despite my reservations I continued to implement CLT in my practice because it was centrally mandated by 'experts' (who are supposed to know better) albeit without much success.

### b) Taking Agency

It took me considerable time and research to wean off the perceptions of myself as deficient and realize the incommensurability of CLT in my teaching-learning context. The dialectical tension between my unarticulated values and the imposition of policy-reform, which I was expected to implement as a passive receptor regardless of my experience otherwise, led me to self-initiate my professional development through research. The practical question – 'How do I make my voice heard in policy and practice?' has become central in shaping my subsequent personal and professional development, although I was unaware of its significance then. In seeking ways to validate and legitimize my experience as an ELT teacher, which could otherwise have been dismissed as subjective and anecdotal, I decided to take the established route of pursuing a doctoral degree. By 'established route', I mean writing academic papers and/or pursuing certification degrees, as these remain the recognised methods for 'periphery' practitioners to become engaged in research. From

personal experience I was well aware that, due to myriad issues taking up individual research projects pose a huge challenge for most practitioners in my context, considering the ongoing demands of their jobs. I also realized that creating a platform for the long-neglected voices of practitioners to be heard and heeded in policy and practice would require a collective awareness and endeavor from practitioners in general. These observations were further substantiated by my research in SLTE, teacher-cognition, ELF, postcolonial studies and TR, where there has been a growing impetus in recent years for practitioners to become active in research and create alternative and localized knowledge-bases more suited to their unique teaching and learning contexts.

### c) Moving From the Individual to General

Extending my practical query from the individual 'I' to the general – *How do 'we' make 'our' voices heard in policy and practice?* – as well as looking for ways to help practitioners become active in research in my context, I came across collaborative TR. I assumed that the process of going through action-reflection cycles of shared experiences would enable practitioners to talk about policy and practice in an informed way, with shared experiences and empirical evidence. The collective input from such collaborative research has the potential to contribute to the creation of a localized, professional knowledge-base over time, which, as postcolonial scholars argue, is central in empowering NNESTs, particularly in the 'periphery' (Canagarajah 2005; Kumaravadivelu 2016). I was, however, aware that while the solution appeared straightforward theoretically, in reality helping local teachers to become interested in research, then making a commitment to undertake it, would be extremely challenging. Accordingly, my small-scale research project with three colleagues in HE settings explored the challenges and feasibility of collaborative practitioner research in my own context.

### d) Evolution of Values

Looking back, my practice reveals how my values have evolved over time. I started my career believing education to be an emancipatory and enlightening endeavour. However, I know now that access to education does not automatically ensure this, and both education and ELT are value-laden practices. This is evident locally, evidenced in the Bangladesh government's policy to ensure 'English for all', which, despite all intents and purposes to ensure social democracy and equality, has led to greater socio-economic divides in the country due to unequal access to English in State and elitist private education. Globally, the marginalization of NNESTS in ELT, despite their knowledge and expertise, is widely documented and also substantiated by my experience as an ELT teacher and researcher.

I still believe in the general efficacy of education, but I know now that to realize these benefits we need to ensure empowerment and equity in the profession so that practitioners can have their say on policy and make informed decisions about what would work best for their own learners, with confidence and authority. As a teacher-researcher from the 'periphery', I strongly believe that creating knowledge-bases in the unique contexts which teacher-researchers work through, would acknowledge and empower the local expertise of NNESTs and ensure equity in ELT. This would enable us to achieve the ultimate aim of education as a noble, emancipatory and enlightening enterprise for all.

Drawing on my insights from the AR project, the next section enumerates a few key challenges that practitioners faced in becoming more engaged in research in my context. I maintain that, although traditionally misconstrued and dismissed as ‘teacher resistance’, these issues must be addressed, in order to make teacher research viable and sustainable in Bangladesh. I conclude by making recommendations to the Bangladesh government that fulfill a requirement of Living Educational Theory research, seeking to enhance educational influences in the learning of social formations.

## 9. Taking Stock

### a) ‘Our’ Version of Events?

The exploration of teachers’ beliefs brought out many similarities between the research-participants’ and my own experiences of implementing CLT. For example, despite obvious contextual mismatches and generally agreeing on CLT not working at tertiary level, none of the participants critically questioned its suitability in their contexts. Instead, they termed it as “a practical and realistic approach”, and a method “used around the world”. They blamed CLT’s failure primarily on not being applied ‘properly’ at school levels. Participants’ uncritical acceptance of a centrally imposed methodology, despite their own different experiences, mirrors my response to CLT.

It is therefore important for teachers to be aware of the politics of education and foster “independent professionalism” (individually oriented notions of professionalism) along with “sponsored professionalism” (endorsed by institutions or regulatory bodies to promote professional action and administer educational reforms) (Leung 2009). Generally, education from policy reforms to mandated professional qualifications to professionalism, is socially and politically motivated, promoting specific viewpoints and interests regardless of whether they resonate with individual teachers’ beliefs, views and/or practices (Ball 1997). This is particularly true of Bangladesh, where National Educational Policies have the precedence of drastic reformation, corresponding to changes in political regimes, donor agencies and various vested interests in the country (see Chowdhury and Kabir 2014). Therefore, to change the status quo from mere “mechanical operators of pedagogic procedures”, practitioners would need to cultivate a critical awareness of their practice in keeping with “wider educational and social issues and take appropriate action to modify their values and practices” (Leung 2009, p. 55). This is where teacher research could be useful for practitioners to develop critical awareness and confidently voice their opinions based on their beliefs and practices. However, like most contexts trying to involve teachers in research, this remains a major challenge in Bangladesh.

### b. Challenges to Research

Aside from the dearth of teacher-trainings and CPD, a major challenge that practitioners face especially at HE level is the pressure to become research-active and publish papers for their personal and professional development, something the educational culture in Bangladesh does not prepare them for. As one participant astutely observes:

> “As students, we are not taught how to do research or how to write research papers whereas we are expected to do them as teachers. It's a system of self-education which

leaves most teachers with *a general sense of apathy and phobia towards research*" [emphasis added]. (email interview)

Other obstacles to pursuing research emerging from my study consist of commitments in and outside of teaching (administrative and personal), a lack of knowledge about how to do research, a lack of guidance from research-experienced colleagues, minimal or no departmental or institutional support (peer-observation, workshops and teacher-training) for teachers' personal and professional developments, an absence of logistical support *e.g.* published research/ journals and funding, and overall, problems in sustaining motivation in the absence of any support-system for TR.

Therefore, for teacher-participants in my study doing research in their context, it entails venturing into an unknown territory all alone in their spare time, whilst being engaged in the many academic, administrative and personal commitments that comprise daily life. This calls for very strong self-motivation. Sustaining such work for the duration of a research project is indeed a tall order even for those who are keen on pursuing research. Thus, despite there being considerable emphasis in policy for teachers to do research for progression in their career, in reality there is minimal institutional or governmental support for it.

Teachers' prevalent conception of research as primarily quantitative and statistical, connects with their 'grade-centred approach' to measure everything. This ranges from deciding the efficacy of a method and teaching-learning practices, to ascertaining the learners' attainment, to determining the success of the AR project they conducted. All this renders the prospect of doing research intimidating for them because it seems to have little relevance to their practices. Although grades are not always reliable indices to determine progression, in the context of Bangladesh it remains the primary method for ascertaining learners' progress. This may explain participants' apathy and phobia towards research commented on earlier, since they were understandably disheartened at the AR project's 'failure' to yield any tangible outcome, namely improvement in the learners' final test-grades. Perhaps this accounts for teachers viewing research as unrelated to their realities. The difficulty of enabling teachers to do research, however, is not simply an issue of developed or developing contexts. Even within supportive environments, where teachers are well-disposed towards professional development, there are significant challenges in generating teachers' interest in research that they would find relevant and meaningful (Borg 2013).

### c. The Need for Research Culture

A major barrier to promoting teacher-research in Bangladesh, like most contexts, is the lack of any culture of research. In school contexts, culture is defined as a:

"set of assumptions, beliefs and values that predominate in an organization, and which operate in an unconscious or semi-unconscious way" (Halsall 1998, p.29).

Teacher-engagement in research is largely contingent upon the institutional environment they work in, which in turn is shaped by myriad factors, most notably the broader disciplinary culture of ELT and the institution's approach to research in this context (Borg 2013). However, it is clear from both my own and the study-participants' experiences

that, at HE, beyond the general assumptions of the efficacy of teacher research for personal development and progression in a career, there is not much incentive for practitioners to become researchers. Whatever little institutional or government support is available, there is scant information on how to access it and hardly any dissemination of research conducted by experienced colleagues in departmental workshops and seminars. To engage in research, teachers require a clear understanding of why they are conducting research. No such clear rationale emerged from the study. Thus, in the absence of any clear purpose and policy guidelines, teacher research remains far removed from teachers' everyday reality as a vague, yet mandatory goal required for progression in their careers.

The absence of research cultures and the self-initiated nature of research in 'periphery' contexts like Bangladesh, thus gives rise to a highly individualistic and often competitive environment in academia. In such a setting, exchanging ideas, disseminating research-findings, guidance from experienced colleagues and/or collaboration, rarely take place. The absence of a collegial environment adversely impacts on practitioners, requiring them to initiate their own personal and professional development. Practitioners, therefore, tend to operate on their cognition and implicit personal-practical theories developed over time as L2 learners and teachers. However, despite fundamentally shaping their practices, these beliefs and theories remain largely tacit. From research into the cognition of teachers, we know that once established, beliefs are difficult to change, despite evidence to the contrary (Borg 2006). The educational and professional culture in Bangladesh hardly offers scope for practitioners to question their beliefs and practices critically. Hence, when faced with policy reforms, they are reluctant to change their long-held beliefs and practices, which is misinterpreted as resistance.

It is therefore important for 'periphery' practitioners to move consciously away from the concept of finding a 'magic' solution for pedagogical issues and towards a post-method orientation, where there are different pathways to approaching a single teaching-learning problem, with varied solutions and outcomes. Promoting a research-culture and ensuring an environment of openness and collegiality in the academic arena, would allow practitioners to come out of method-based, single paradigm mindsets. It would enable them to become critically aware of their practices and recognise language learning as a vastly complex phenomenon that is impossible to solve with a single approach. They could then seek alternative localized solutions if one 'fails'.

### d. Who Do We Think We Are? – Image of the 'Self' and Others

The largely ignored affective aspect of teaching is another major barrier to promoting teacher research in the 'periphery'. This significantly influences practitioners' sense of identity, cognition and practice. Current research in teacher-cognition includes constructs such as teachers' attitudes, identities and emotions as integral parts of practitioners' mental makeup and the unobservable dimensions of teaching. It is argued that a teacher's confidence is most dependent on his/her own degree of competence in language (Borg 2009).

In Bangladesh the age-old, prevalent image of the teacher as 'flawless' and a 'fount of knowledge' (Chowdhury 2003) raises practitioners' affective barriers in front of colleagues - inhibiting the sharing of ideas, exchanging views, experiences, opinions and being observed

by peers – to the considerable detriment of their self-confidence. This was evident when I offered to observe some classes as part of this project. Despite explaining that the purpose of the observation was to see how their professed beliefs manifested in practice, all of them admitted feeling anxious about making mistakes and being evaluated, negatively affecting their lesson-delivery during observation. One of the essential preconditions in creating and supporting a research culture in a school is whether "there is openness and trust, a willingness and ability to speak one's mind and to listen to others" (Carter and Halsall 1998, p. 84). Responses from participants demonstrated a strong element of 'judgment' and a distinct absence of openness and mutual trust, despite collaborating on the project for over a year. This resonates with my experience as a novice university teacher, when I similarly refrained from sharing my struggle to implement CLT with colleagues for fear of being judged negatively. It also indicates the lack of a culture of research and the difficulty of establishing one in Bangladesh.

Teachers' attitudes towards 'flawlessness' also illustrate the insidious yet pervasive influence of NS norms in the thinking and practices of 'periphery' practitioners (Holliday 2005). While it is natural to aspire for 'perfection' in an L2 one has invested considerable time and energy into as learners and teachers, aspiring for the NS standard as benchmark for gauging proficiency negatively impacts NNESTs' by raising their affective barriers. This holds particularly true for postcolonial contexts like Bangladesh where, even 80 years after its dissolution, the legacy of the elitist colonial education system and approximation of the NS norms continue to dominate (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014). Pointing to institutional and sociocultural expectations from ELT, teacher participants observed: "You have to appear as the flawless accurate one…otherwise why are you in the job?" ELT literature abounds with reports from both the 'periphery' and the centre of NNESTs' feelings of inadequacy, marginalization, anxiety and insecurity stemming from their 'non-nativeness', which all results in negative self-images. This is evident in both my own and the research participants' unquestioning acceptance of the efficacy of western methods like CLT, despite obvious contextual mismatches and viewing the 'self' as deficient.

It is therefore important to consider the role emotions play in shaping what teachers think, believe, know and do (Borg 2009). Statistically, despite constituting 80% of the ELT professionals (Canagarajah 1999), NNESTs seldom question the ideologies and beliefs associated with ELT. Instead of simply accepting these prevalent notions at face value, practitioners need to critically re-examine them through conducting classroom-based teacher research on pedagogical issues faced in their contexts. This could go a long way to addressing the prevailing inequity in the profession and achieving a better fit between policy and practice.

## 9. 'Through the Looking Glass'

The process of creating an explanation of my educational influence in my own learning and the learning of others by initiating this research project, has facilitated a clearer understanding of my educational values, which form the explanatory principles and living standards of judgment as an ELT practitioner. I have come to realize that the numerous demands of the job – teacher-trainings and CPD; pressure to meet governmental, institutional, academic, administrative and different stakeholder expectations; the need to become research-active and publish papers; and various personal and affective factors on

top of existing workload – all these make practitioners lose connection with their 'living self'. The dynamic and time-pressured nature of teaching makes it difficult for most to think beyond the next lesson-plan, the next class, completing the syllabus, and the upcoming exams. The essentially tacit nature of teachers' beliefs, their real and imagined (mis)conceptions about research, the arduous road of pursuing actual research and publication, sustaining motivation to keep research-active and the prevalent view in ELT of teachers as passive implementers of other's research, also deter practitioners from questioning the *status quo* and exploring their actual beliefs.

In the postcolonial context of Bangladesh, the politics of English runs deep, with the clash between Bangla and English "having marked frustrating disjuncture in any attempt to produce a coherent, consistent and time-sensitive English language policy" (Chowdhury and Kabir 2014:3). The prevalent educational culture of unconditional obedience to authority in Bangladesh does not promote inquisitiveness or equip learners with the knowledge to conduct research. When these learners become practitioners at HS and tertiary levels without any teacher-training, they are expected to follow blindly the 'West-mandated' and centre-prescribed (government/education ministry) knowledge-systems, their materials and methods, irrespective of their applicability to their contexts and regardless of their personal beliefs and practices. The insidious, all pervasive influence of 'native-speakerism' and the resultant lack of confidence, lead to an anxiety to perform in a profession, in which NNESTs by default are relegated to second-grade citizenry even before they start as practitioners. This means that the majority feels unqualified to raise questions on the methods and materials developed by 'experts', as evinced from my own and the teacher-participants' experiences. Therefore, these practitioners lack the confidence to value what they know intuitively through experience and practice as knowledge and remain largely unaware of their living contradictions in their practices.

Yet, it is this context-specific knowledge that could potentially enable 'periphery' practitioners to devise localised solutions to their teaching-learning problems, as well as generate personal theories and/or contributes to a collective knowledge-base. The absence of a collaborative culture of research in academia further deters them from investigating pedagogical issues encountered in practice, sharing views with colleagues, and/or critiquing policy-mandates for fear of being judged negatively. Unsurprisingly, those interested in research opt for qualifications validated by the West and deemed prestigious locally, with greater academic recognition and financial benefits, leading to the phenomenon of 'brain-drain' in developing countries, which leaves the already scant resources of the home location even more depleted.

My study demonstrates that this is where small-scale, classroom-based collaborative research projects could prove useful, in which practitioners would begin from the premise that they are the local experts, their knowledge is of great value and it is up to them to devise localized, context-sensitive solutions to their teaching-learning issues. Investigating relevant pedagogical issues and reflecting on their practices would eventually enable critically informed decision-making on what works in their particular contexts. The action-reflection cycle would clarify the meanings of their unarticulated values as they emerge in practice and generate their own living-educational-theories. This means that, instead of trying to fit knowledge into pre-existing theoretical frameworks as they seek to create valid explanations of their embodied values and unique educational influences in learning, they

could draw on these theories to support their work when necessary. Disseminating findings of collective research in their contexts as espoused by current research in ELT would help build local knowledge-bases essential for creating a postmethod condition. As Canagarajah (2010, p. 662) argues, many issues of topical interest in local contexts do not fit within the research interests of the West. It is therefore difficult to transmit these ideas in 'mainstream' conversation. New conversations need to occur. With the recognition of the localized, anecdotal and location-specific nature of educational practices, there is a growing impetus in teacher research to consider alternative forms for its dissemination (online forums, poster presentation, videos *etc*.) rather than the standardised measures of positivist, scientific research.

## 10. First Step in Journey of Thousand Miles!

Living Educational Theory research requires evidence for the claims made. The AR project I initiated with colleagues to explore their tacit beliefs corroborates the potential of teacher research to ensure empowerment and equity of local practitioners in my context. They are the core values by which I have created an account of my living-educational-theory research and evaluated my own and others' practices and creation of knowledge in this paper. I cannot claim that the project has brought about any 'sea changes' in teacher-participants' beliefs and practices, as from personal experience I know that growing critical awareness takes considerable time. But practitioners have reported that the project has impacted on their practices in a number of ways, which makes me hopeful about the feasibility of teacher research actually working in my context.

For example, conducting AR dispelled practitioners' preconceptions about research as primarily quantitative and statistical. One participant commented:

> "Since AR is not very different from what we do in real practice, it's not strenuous... If this is what research involves, I am ready to conduct such tasks."

The above response shows that teachers will be more prone to conducting research that is relevant to their immediate pedagogical concerns.

Practitioners were also positive about the collaborative aspect of the project, agreeing that it has improved their practice and contributed to a feeling of collegiality among them. Although they remained skeptical of the project's ability to improve the learners' test performances, all admitted to observing some positive changes in the learners' overall classroom performances.

One participant reported that inductive grammar teaching led to greater learner participation in her classes "even from the shyest ones". She now plans to "stick to it" in future. Another received positive feedback that her learners improved in correcting their errors in writing. Most importantly, in an informed way participants could validate which aspects of CLT worked in their context (interactive classes). They also outlined what they adapted (combining the traditional role of authoritarian teacher with teacher as friend and facilitator in CLT). They reported on what they negotiated (moving away from an 'English only' MOI by using Bangla and translations when required) and what they discarded (peer correction and the concept of learner independence which conflicted with their sociocultural contexts) in their practices with confidence and authority.

Teacher-participants, whilst justifying the rationale for their pedagogical decisions in their contexts supported by empirical evidence, illustrated that doing collaborative research and disseminating findings could empower practitioners to critique policy reforms in an evidence-based way and support the creation of a collective knowledge-base. They were also more confident in articulating how their tacit beliefs have evolved over time and shaped their practices. For example, one participant reminisced:

> "Ten years ago when I started my career, I was too idealistic and theoretical, but my experiences with the learners have taught me to be less rigid, more flexible because the bottom line for a teacher is to help the students; for that, if I have to change my techniques, I do not mind to do that."

All conceded that observing each other's classes would possibly be not too intimidating, although they expressed strong reservations on peer-observation in general. Participants also discussed the potential that conducting collaborative teacher research on a large scale involving secondary, higher secondary and HE practitioners, could have in developing 'home-grown theories' and addressing the pedagogical issues in their contexts. However, all agreed that such a huge undertaking would need larger institutional and government support. While admittedly these are baby steps towards a massively ambitious aim of creating a collective, professional knowledge-base, I consider these as positive signs to promote a culture of research in 'periphery' contexts for local practitioners to have their say in policy and practice.

## 11. Looking Forward – Some Recommendations

The paper looks at how initiating and conducting collaborative teacher research contributed to Bangladeshi university teachers' understanding of their own cognition and practices in their context and helped me to develop my own living-educational-theory. In doing so, it also explores the efficacy of the much-advocated teacher research and the reality of actually getting teachers research-engaged in 'periphery' settings like Bangladesh. Participant responses to the research project have made me optimistic that collaborative AR could increase teacher interest in investigating the myriad problems they face in their daily practices and find location-specific solutions to pedagogical issues they are actually concerned about. This could dispel some of the prevalent myths and teacher inhibitions about research being quantitative, unrelated to their realities, yet mandatory for career progression at HE. Considering that individual research poses significant challenges for NNESTs, this study maintains that small-scale, classroom-based, guided collaborative research, especially AR with colleagues on specific problems in their context, could be the first step for practitioners to become research-active. By integrating research as a problem-solving activity in regular practice, rather than something divorced from their reality, would help promote a research culture, encouraging mutual trust, openness and collegiality among practitioners. Sharing and dissemination of such research in the teaching community could potentially transform and legitimize their long-ignored tacit knowledge and subjective experiences and go a long way to strengthen practitioners' voices by theorizing from their practice and practicing what they theorize. This would enable NNESTs to critique policy reforms and have their say on top-down changes in an informed way, creating the localized knowledge-base essential for the equity and empowerment of marginalized NNESTs in a

profession that has not moved far away from its NS paradigm, despite significant conceptual shifts in ELT. However, I agree with Kumaravadivelu (2016) that impetus to change the *status quo* has to come collectively and from within (NNESTs). Although both 'periphery' and centre scholars need to disrupt the divisive politics of ELT jointly, Holliday (2005, p. ix) rightly warns:

> "'Centre' researchers trying to empower 'periphery' communities to which they do not belong may in the end only strengthen the discourses of the 'Centre'".

In articulating my living values, I am aware that, despite being central to shaping my practice and identity as an ELT practitioner, they remained largely implicit until now. The present paper chronicles an attempt to make these values explicit by creating an explanation of my living-educational-theory through a retrospective and reflective account of my professional journey spanning over 25 years. As such, I am yet to apply my newly discovered values as standards of judgment to my own practice, which is my future goal as a practitioner. In the light of my research, and in keeping with a Living Educational Theory research approach to enhancing professionalism in education and to improving practice, I therefore make the following policy-related recommendations to central government, and to leaders in our educational institutions:

(i) Although in the National Education policy 2010 teacher research is encouraged at all levels, a central government initiative is required to create conditions that will promote classroom-based inquiries by teachers, and provide adequate support to sustain, disseminate and continue such TR. Government support Incentives are required in encouraging practitioners to explore the implications of questions such as, *How do I improve what I am doing in my professional practice during my contribution to 12 years of compulsory education*? Making research simply a criterion for progression in one's career is not going to make teachers active researchers. Central government needs to provide specific guidance and leadership to promote a view of professionalism in education that focuses on the responsibilities of teachers to contribute their enquiries to the professional knowledge-base of teachers in Bangladesh and globally.

(ii) Developing an appropriate curriculum in pre-service, in-service teacher-trainings and HE in Bangladesh for the continuing professional development of teachers and of department/faculty/institutional heads. This includes focusing on the values of education in Bangladesh that constitute their cultural identity, and the skills to engage in educational enquiries that are centred on improving the learning of teacher-trainers, teachers and their pupils and to contributing to the professional knowledge-base of education. Particularly important is the role of department/faculty heads in promoting and sustaining teacher-researcher groups within their faculties/institutions to improve practice and to contribute to the knowledge-base of education.

This recommendation is part of my living-educational-theory as I explain my educational influences in the learning of social formations that influence my practice and understanding.

## Glossary

AR – Action Research

CLT – Communicative approach to Language Teaching

DFID – Department for International Development

ELT – English Language Teaching

ELTIP – English Language Teaching Improvement Project

EFL – English as a Foreign Language

GTM – Grammar-Translation Method

HE – Higher Education

L2 – Language 2 (Second Language)

MOI – Medium of instruction

NCTB – National Curriculum and Textbook Board

NS – Native speaker

NNESTs – Non-Native English- Speaking Teachers

NNS – Non-Native speaker

TR – Teacher research

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