Pedagogy of Teaching Bengali as a Second Language

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REGARDING THE AUTHOR

Professor Kyoko Niwa is teaching Bengali to the Japanese students in Tokyo University of Foreign Studies for last several years. As a teacher, she has noticed several problems and challenges of teaching Bengali as a second language to the Japanese students. In two successive workshops jointly organized by (a) School of Languages and Linguistics, J.U. and the Bengali Department, J.U. and (b) School of Languages and Linguistics, J.U. and International Society of Bengal Studies on 13th September, 2018 and 19th September, 2018 in Jadavpur University. The current work is a rendition of Prof. Niwa’s reflection on the teaching of Bengali as second language to the Japanese students.

1. Why and how our students learn Bengali

Firstly I would like to introduce myself and our university. Long time ago, I was a Ph.D. student of this university and obtained the degree from Comparative Literature here. My major is Bengali literature, especially modern Bengali literature including Rabindranath Tagore. However, after returning home, I had mainly taught Hindi and general Indian literature at various universities since there was no such position teaching Bengali language and literature then, though there had been a request to open such a department where Bengali is specialized.

6 years ago, that is 2012, the ministry of education finally admitted to establish the Bengali department at our university where I also studied, namely Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. This name is rather misunderstanding, this is not a part of Tokyo University, instead, this is a completely independent university though it is quite small in size. Anyway, since then, I have been working at the university as the head of the department and I feel very honored and fortunate to be so. This is actually the first place in Japan ever where both teachers and students can concentrate on Bengali Studies.

Our university has quite a unique course of study which is not always well understood. Usually, students decide on specific disciplines such as sociology, history, linguistics or literature when they enter his/her university. However, at our university students choose his/her language and region first before they enter the university. For first two years, our students concentrate on learning his/her specialized language and regional study which helps learning languages as well as very basic idea of various discipline. At the beginning of the third year, each student chooses a discipline and using his/her own knowledge of a specialized language, he/she will write a graduation thesis in the end. At the same time, we have two faculties, one is the school of Language and Culture Studies where
students can study in the field of humanity, the other is the school of International and Area Studies where they can study in the field of Sociology in a broader sense. This choice of faculty is also made when they enter the university. This system is rather complicated, so I will give you an example of the Bengali department in order to make it clear.

We have ten students each year for Bengali Studies. Five out of ten are the students of School of Language and Culture Studies and the other five are the students of School of International and Area Studies. Students must choose own language and faculty when they sit for the entrance examination already and they cannot change it till the end. A student of Bengali department belongs to either of the faculties, but all the students of both faculties study Bengali language together for the first two years. After they learn the language to some extent spending two years, each of the students chooses the discipline. For example, a student of school of Language and Culture Studies may choose literature as a discipline so that he/she studies Bengali literature or a student of school of International Area Studies may choose history as a discipline so as to study Bengali History.

Now you may have a question that on what basis those students of Bengali department chose Bengali language in the first place. As I already mentioned, they have to make a choice when they sit for the entrance examination, which means they have to decide what language they are going to learn while they are high school students. We have 27 languages (English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Czech, Italian, Russian, Mongolian, Uzbek language, Chinese, Korean, Thai, Indonesian, Malaysian, Filipino, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, Burmese, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali) in which one can be specialized, and it is actually quite difficult to choose one of them at the age of 18 or 19.

We, teaching faculty, are also interested in the motive of learning Bengali language and always ask them why they chose this language. Actually, our university is quite well known in Japan and there is always this kind of students who are willing to enter our university any way regardless of the language in which they major. Still, most of the students who choose Bengali language, have some sort of image of Bengal and a reason to learn the language however immature it is.

Nowadays, Rabindranath Tagore is known only by name among those young students and sometimes Amartya Sen or Mohammad Yunus are known better. Students of School of International and Area Studies are apt to be interested in development studies and Bangladesh rather than traditional culture of whole Bengal. Students of School of Language and Culture Studies are apt to be interested in religion and culture of whole Bengal. This is only a tendency and each student has his/her reason for learning Bengali. The point is, we have to teach Bengali to those students who have various interests and purposes though it is a very small class.

Also, those 1st year students who start learning Bengali are still very immature and have vague image or even incorrect information about Bengal. Not only to teach the language itself, we always try to encourage our students to know the real Bengal and to find a special interest of their own. Learning Bengali cannot totally be discussed in the same line of learning English. English is a world-wide link language and nowadays people learn it for many reasons. On the other hand, English has become a tool to communicate with each other and one does not necessarily have to like English or American culture. On the contrary, Bengali language is closely associated with Bengali people and culture. It is difficult to keep on learning if one lacks respect or love towards Bengal. This is why we provide several classes of Bengali culture apart from language classes.

2. Method of teaching Bengali Grammar

Now we move on to the method of teaching Bengali as a second language. Usually we start teaching from Bengali letters and basic pronunciation. There are some texts which teach Bengali through Roman letters, but I do not recommend that because Roman letters cannot represent exact
pronunciation of Bengali. Furthermore, one cannot use a dictionary without the knowledge of letters. One has to know the Bengali letters anyway if he/she wants to learn Bengali because almost everything is written in this letter in Bengal and if you do not know how to read Bengali letters, you cannot read even signboards or the easiest text for children. Actually, the first part of learning basic letters of Bengali won’t be a problem for Japanese students. Japanese language has one of the hardest writing systems, so it is not a difficult task for our students to learn Bengali letters. Indeed, they memorize basic letters almost in a couple of days.

Of course there are some pronunciations which are not familiar to them, but the difficult part is not those pronunciations which do not exist in Japanese. What puzzles students is the fact that words are not always pronounced as they are written. Why খফয় is pronounced khobor instead of khoboro, why সত is moto instead of mot, why কান is sometimes pronounced as kon, whereas sometimes pronounced as kono, why it is not always written as কোনা if it is pronounced as kono and কোনও is the same as কোনা? If so, why they are written differently from time to time? It cannot always be explained logically and as a result, they are forced to memorize them one by one.

When they come across combined characters (মুক্তোক্ষয়), things become worse. Some combined characters are difficult to analyze and some others have peculiar rules of pronunciation. Such as বফশ্ববফদ্যোরয়, ছোত্র, যোষ্ট্র, ঩যীক্ষো are difficult words for beginners. It is not that the pronunciation of each word is difficult for them, they find it difficult because they cannot read those words aloud as they are written. Why বিষ is pronounced as bissho instead of bishwa or bishbo, why পরীক্ষা is parikkha, not pariksha. There is no end to these questions. One may say you can teach the other way round, that is, pronunciation first and then spelling, like native children. However, This cannot be a solution for non-Bengali speakers because it is difficult to find out the right spelling for them and it will be all the more confusing.

To make it worse, there is no phonetic transcription in Bengali-English dictionary. Since there is no Bengali-Japanese dictionary yet, students usually use Bengali-English dictionary which is originally intended for Bengali students learning English. Students use pronunciation dictionary (उচ্চোযণ अववधोन) side by side and it is time consuming to find out the right pronunciation through those dictionaries.

Actually, this is the first barrier for non-Bengali students to get used to Bengali spellings, which means to be able to read aloud textbooks smoothly. Compared with Hindi, deviation between spelling and pronunciation of Bengali is larger and the number of combined characters is also much more. I myself felt uneasy about this matter in the first stage and it takes some time to get used to. So I always tell my students if you can read aloud any texts smoothly you have come halfway through of learning Bengali.

Next stage is to learn Bengali grammar. Maybe conjugation of verb is one of the most important issues in basic grammar and again it takes some time to get used to various types of conjugation. Conjugation of খোওয়ো is not always same as যো, or conjugation of দেওয়া is also a little different whereas there are some exceptions like দেওয়া or যাওয়া. But it won’t be much of a problem because we face this kind of problem whenever we learn foreign language.

All the more, there are some advantages for Japanese to learn Bengali. There is no concept of gender in Bengali grammar and singular and plural form is almost the same as in the case of Japanese. Word order is also similar to Japanese as you can see the sentence below:

ঋতু গড়কাল বাজারে গিয়ে শাড়ি কিনেছি।

=watashiwa kino bazaruni itte sariwo kaimashita

Here, each word in Bengali and Japanese parallels one to one, that is, we do not have to worry about
sentence structure here. Actually, once you master the case inflection (i.e. *bajar* becomes *bajare*) and conjugation of verb (*yaoya* becomes *giye* or *kena* becomes *kinechi* in this case), you can make sentences almost instantly.

Of course one might hesitate which tense he/she should use. Especially our students often cannot decide whether they should use either simple past tense or present perfect tense since we do not have perfect form of verb. Also, when one steps forward to make complex sentences, he/she may find it a little difficult to use relative words since we do not have similar words in Japanese.

The most difficult part of Bengali grammar for non-Bengali students is probably the usage of genitive case and compound verb. Students are often puzzled to see a sentence like আভোয খোওয়ো হনয়নছ and do not understand why it cannot be said simply আমি খেয়েছি। The difference between করেছি and করে দিয়েছি or করে নিয়েছি, খেয়েছি and খেয়ে ফেলেছি is not always clear to them. We have a similar expression with করে দিয়েছি, but করে নিয়েছি is almost impossible to be translated in Japanese.

Despite these difficulties, on the whole, Bengali grammar is comparatively easy to acquire for Japanese students. It can be said that difficulties for non-Bengali lie in the cultural context rather than grammar. For example, নমস্কার is a simple salutation in West Bengal, but you must use আসসোরোভু আরোইকুভ in Bangladesh. There are some basic words which are different in West and East like জল and পানি. There are even variations of name such as ডো নোভ and বোর নোভ. Salutation and addressing is maybe the most difficult part in conversation practice in the first stage.

In English, you can simply say “Hello, Mr. Smith, how are you?”, but it is unexpectedly difficult to say the same in Bengali. If it is Mr. Hosein or Mr. Khan, hello should be আসসোরোভু আরোইকুভ and if it is Mr Banerjee, it should be নমস্কার. In addition, Mr Hosein or Mr. Banerjee is not easy to be translated. Should it be Hosein sahib instead of using babu? Or should I use first name when I address someone rather than family name? “How are you” is not also so easy either since you hesitate which you, *tumi* or *apni*, should be used.

Generally, Japanese students are not only quiet, but also very discreet and try to avoid any mistakes. Consequently, they often remain silent even in conversation class not to make any mistakes which might be impolite to the teacher.

So far, I have been talking mainly about my experience of teaching Bengali. Almost all the students’ mother tongue or first language is Japanese in Japan and the difficulty that I talked about is the difficulty for those students. Please keep in mind that teaching method or where teachers should stress upon while teaching should be different in many cases depending on students’ first language.

3. Making textbooks and dictionary

There are a couple of Bengali grammar textbooks written in Japanese including mine. We usually try to bring in sentences and vocabulary impartial to both Bengal because each learner has a purpose to learn. My textbook titled “New Express Bengali” has a framework that a Japanese girl travels around Bengal and I set up the situation that she travels in west Bengal in the first 10 lessons and then shifts to Bangladesh and travels there in the last 10 lessons. As mentioned already, the context of Bengali culture is quite important when a non-Bengali learns Bengali language so that I thought out this kind of framework.

When I made a textbook for trainees at JICA, there was no such problem. All the trainees of overseas corporation volunteers of JICA who are learning Bengali there aim to go to Bangladesh, so I
made it quite differently working with a teacher from Bangladesh.

Making a dictionary is a much bigger task than making a textbook and unfortunately, there is no Bengali-Japanese dictionary published so far. It is rather a pity that no one yet has started on this work though there had been several scholars of Bengal Studies in Japan. Looking out on publications, there are two kinds of quite good Hindi-Japanese dictionaries and a Urdu-Japanese dictionary was also published long time ago. There are even Punjabi-Japanese dictionary and Kannada-Japanese dictionary and it is obvious that Bengal Studies in Japan has delayed in the field of making a dictionary.

To make a dictionary, firstly we have to select vocabulary for that. Nowadays, all the teachers of 27 languages at our university participate in a program of making a common glossary in each language. Students can utilize this glossary through smartphone in near future. We adopted CEFR standard glossary for the time being and made a first level glossary (A1 and A2 of CEFR), which contains about 3000 words already.

Of course this is only a glossary, not a proper dictionary so that our department is now trying to convert it into dictionary style. First we have to add some necessary words because the original glossary of CEFR is made on the basis of English and we find so many important Bengali words are missing there. For example, there is a word like cookie or chocolate or pancake, but there is none of daily Bengali food. Or English has only one word for grandfather whereas Bengali has four kinds. We have been examining this kind of vocabulary including not only food, words for relatives, but also name of months of Bengali calendar, name of Gods or name of famous festivals.

We are now groping for the style of a dictionary. First of all, the description of IPA phonetic sign is needed in order to help a non-Bengali learner to know the proper pronunciation as mentioned already. Secondly, we should include all the spellings which are used at least in printed texts. Indeed, there are so many varieties of spelling in Bengali and we cannot find every one of them in a dictionary. As for the benefit of non-Bengali, all the variants should be included. Not only inclusion, brief explanation might be needed such as in the case of কি and কী because some writers distinguish the use of কি and কী whereas some writers only use কি. The difference of spelling between West Bengal and Bangladesh also should be taken into account. Thirdly, it is convenient for non-Bengali students if combined words are also added as much as possible. Advanced students should know the rule of Sandhi, at least roughly in order to realize a combined word, but still, it is sometimes difficult to analyze a long combined word by themselves.

As mentioned above, existing Bengali-English dictionaries are targeting Bengali students learning English and because of this nature, there are not enough explanations about usage of Bengali words. All the more, we sometimes find translated English word is not exactly fit for it just because there is no equal idea or notion in English. There might be an exact word in Japanese instead, because our idea was very much influenced by Indian philosophy in ancient time. It is obvious we need a good Bengali-Japanese dictionary as soon as possible but at the same time, making a dictionary is not at all an easy task. We need manpower but our department is very small. Now we just got started on this task and have to plan to make it in the long term. Indeed, I try my best thinking “better late than never.”