Transforming Secondary Education in Bangladesh: A Reflective Essay on student-centered Pedagogy

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Abstract

The reflective essay tries to find out the necessity of student-based instructional pedagogy in the context of Bangladesh Secondary Education system. The data and information have been collected through library methods, i.e., from various sources such as books, journals, government websites, newspapers, etc. The data reflects the findings that most of the teachers follow the traditional teacher-based teaching method while conducting classes in secondary schools. The reasons for this are numerous, including the use of traditional methods, inadequate professional development training, flawed curriculum systems, a lack of technological knowledge, and an authoritative attitude. Conversely, secondary education needs a democratic classroom where students will get their proper involvement with belongingness, and their voice will be heard. The authorities have taken some steps, but they also face challenges in implementing a student-based teaching system. Teachers also face other challenges like large classroom size, accommodation problems, and overworkload, which tend to encourage them to follow teacher-based classroom activities.

Keywords: educational change; pedagogy; student-based classroom; teacher-based classroom; teachers' challenges

1. Introduction

The education sector of Bangladesh has been developing much since Bangladesh came into being in 1971. After that, there have been many reformations but still the authority is trying to upgrade the education system here. It has become a continuous process now. I will look into the Bangladeshi secondary education system first, and then I will try to justify why the new pedagogy system is necessary for a better education system.

In the educational change plan model, I have decided to focus on student-based teaching pedagogy. At the present time, very often the teaching methods are mostly teacher-based. The students have less chance to be engaged in the classroom. (Ozomadu et.al. 2019) In the teacher-based method, the teachers give lectures, and the students listen to them passively. The real outcomes cannot be ensured. (Cakır, 2015). So the change plan is that the teachers will gain their efficacy after some steps so that they can make the students more engaged in the class, and a teacher will act as a facilitator, not as a commander, in the class. He will not take the class in an authoritative way; rather the class will be a democratic one.

Before finding out the root causes of the problems, I have an endeavor to give a project plan for my educational change plan. This project plan aims to increase students' achievement in their academic performance through implementing new pedagogical systems. Here in the academic institutions, the teachers are the main variable to implement the new pedagogy. Though there are some other stakeholders, some professional development measures are taken for this purpose. 1) Teachers will be provided with proper training. 2) New books will be provided, which will help students keep engaged. 3) Some seminars will be arranged for the motivation of the teachers. 4) New assignments will be introduced for the students. 5) Assessment systems should be changed, and other recommendations will be provided thereby.

There will be some challenges to implement the change plans because the ancient traditions have been practiced for centuries in our countries (Sultana, 2016). So, it is not easy to dilapidate overnight. First. Some teachers who don't have proper knowledge about student-based pedagogy and who like an authoritarian class may be interfere here. The teacher-student ratio should be developed, and that is, new teachers will be recruited, which will require funding in the secondary and higher secondary levels. The classrooms are too large, causing more challenges for the teachers (Akanda, 2025; Das, 2025). Guardians should be motivated about the new system instead of the traditional system of teaching (Paul et.al. 2021). As it is an educational reformative plan, other challenges may be faced associated with the educational change plan.

2. Theoretical framework on student-based pedagogy

The proposed shift from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy is grounded in several foundational educational theories. First, constructivist theory, as articulated by Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner, posits that learning is an active process in which learners construct knowledge through experience, exploration, and reflection. In such classrooms, the learner is not a passive recipient of information but an active participant, making sense of new information through engagement with problems and peers.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory adds further depth through the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development. Within this framework, teachers serve as facilitators who scaffold students' learning experiences, guiding them just beyond their current level of competence with the help of peers or adults (Shabani et al., 2010). This supports the vision of a classroom where teachers promote independent problem-solving and peer collaboration.

Critical pedagogy, championed by Paulo Freire (2000), challenges the traditional "banking model" of education and advocates for dialogic, participatory learning spaces. In such classrooms, students are co-creators of knowledge, empowered to express their thoughts, raise questions, and engage with content meaningfully. These ideas align directly with the need for democratic classrooms in Bangladesh's secondary schools, where students often lack voice and agency.

Lastly, learner-centered teaching as proposed by Weimer (2013) emphasizes giving students more responsibility for their learning. This approach promotes autonomy, motivation, and engagement, especially when aligned with continuous feedback and reflective teaching practices.

These theoretical foundations justify the need for reforming Bangladesh's secondary education system. They provide a robust framework for transitioning from a rigid, lecture-driven model to one that fosters inclusive, engaged, and equitable learning for all students.

3. Literature review

3.1. Global perspectives on student-centered pedagogy

Student-centered pedagogy is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural learning theories that emphasize learner autonomy, active engagement, and collaborative knowledge construction (Weimer 2013; Vygotsky 1978). This approach promotes an educational environment in which students are co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients. Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy similarly advocates for dialogic classrooms where teachers and students engage in mutual learning processes that challenge traditional hierarchies and empower student voice.

Globally, researchers have emphasized the importance of transforming teacher roles from authority figures to facilitators of learning. Weimer (2013) outlines five key shifts necessary to establish learner-centered classrooms, including redistributing classroom power, encouraging self-directed learning, and using assessment as a tool for reflection rather than compliance. These ideas are echoed in the work of Hoidn (2017), who calls for structured student-centered environments that promote deep learning, particularly in higher education.

Evidence from the Bangladeshi context further reinforces the value of student-centered approaches. This aligns with global findings that emphasize the importance of peer interaction and active participation. In another study, Hossain (2021) highlights the role of peer observation in enhancing teacher performance, noting that reflective professional collaboration contributes to more dynamic and student-responsive teaching practices.

Together, these theories suggest that student-centered education is not merely a pedagogical trend but a fundamental rethinking of how knowledge is co-constructed in classrooms.

3.2. Challenges to student-centered pedagogy

While student-centered pedagogy offers significant educational benefits, its implementation in developing country contexts remains challenging due to systemic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers. Schweisfurth (2011) argues that many efforts to introduce learner-centered practices fail when they do not account for local realities such as limited teacher training, large class sizes, rigid curricula, and high-stakes examination systems. Similarly, O'Sullivan (2006) notes that in low-resource classrooms, teachers often revert to traditional lecturing methods because they lack institutional support, adequate materials, or manageable student numbers.

In many regions, including South Asia, cultural expectations reinforce teacher authority and student passivity. Tabulawa (2013) explains that student-centered pedagogy often conflicts with social norms that view teachers as unquestionable figures of knowledge. These expectations discourage student questioning, classroom interaction, and collaborative learning. Also, time constraints and pressure to complete syllabi aligned with national examinations often prevent teachers from experimenting with new methods.

The situation in Bangladesh reflects these broader patterns. Teachers in secondary schools frequently face overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching resources, and heavy workloads that limit their capacity to adopt interactive strategies (Akanda and Haque 2025; Haque 2025). Traditional teaching methods are deeply embedded in the national education culture, and many educators were trained within systems that prioritized rote memorization and top-down instruction. As a result, even when teachers are aware of modern pedagogical approaches, they often lack the training or confidence to apply them.

Furthermore, Hossain (2021) highlights that professional development opportunities such as peer observation are still underutilized in many institutions, limiting the potential for reflective teaching practices. This challenge is compounded by the examination system, which continues to prioritize content recall over critical thinking or problem solving. Many students struggle with language accuracy and coherence, problems that are rarely addressed through traditional instruction focused on memorization.

Infrastructural constraints further hinder reform efforts. Limited access to technology, poor classroom design, and inadequate digital literacy among both teachers and students restrict opportunities for interactive learning. Shohel and Kirkwood (2012) observe that even when technological tools are introduced, their integration is inconsistent due to lack of training and maintenance.

Finally, parental attitudes toward education can create additional resistance. Many guardians favor conventional methods that emphasize discipline, grades, and teacher authority, believing these will secure academic success (Paul et al. 2021). This societal pressure often discourages schools from implementing participatory or democratic learning environments.

3.3. Pedagogical barriers in the Bangladeshi context

The secondary education system in Bangladesh faces persistent pedagogical challenges that hinder the effective implementation of student-centered teaching methods. Despite growing awareness of progressive instructional approaches, the classroom environment remains largely teacher-dominated. Multiple studies have observed that classroom practices are still shaped by memorization, limited interaction, and a rigid examination culture (Aktaruzzaman and Muhammad 2011; Akanda and Haque 2025).

One of the primary barriers is the teacher's adherence to conventional roles. Many teachers were trained through systems that emphasized discipline and lecture delivery, leading to deeply ingrained habits and resistance to participatory teaching. Teachers often assume full authority in the classroom, leaving little space for students to voice opinions, ask questions, or engage in collaborative tasks. As Hossain and Younus (2025) note, while there is conceptual support for methods like project-based learning, many teachers struggle to redefine their roles or integrate peer and student interaction effectively into their classroom routines.

Another critical issue is the lack of ongoing professional development. Haque (2025) observes that even when training programs are offered, they are often infrequent, insufficiently resourced, or disconnected from classroom realities. Teachers who lack exposure to learner-centered techniques are less confident in shifting away from traditional pedagogies. Peer observation, a valuable tool for reflective growth, remains underused in many institutions (Hossain 2021).

Infrastructure and class size also limit pedagogical innovation. Secondary schools in both urban and rural areas frequently suffer from overcrowded classrooms and inadequate facilities. In such settings, group work, pair activities, and differentiated instruction become logistically difficult to manage. Teachers often face the pressure of completing extensive syllabi, which further disincentivizes the adoption of interactive strategies.

Language instruction provides a clear example of these limitations. English classes, although central to the curriculum, are commonly conducted in Bengali, with a heavy focus on grammar rules rather than communicative competence. As a result, students struggle to develop the four foundational language skills. Hossain (2024) highlights this issue in his analysis of student essays, revealing that learners often display recurring grammatical and structural errors that stem from instructional practices emphasizing memorization over understanding.

Moreover, the dominant assessment model, which emphasizes high-stakes written examinations, reinforces rote learning and discourages experimental or student-driven classroom activity. Teachers understandably focus on helping students perform in standardized exams, which restricts time and freedom to implement alternative approaches.

3.4. Rationale for pedagogical change

A shift toward student-centered pedagogy in the Bangladeshi secondary education system is not merely desirable but necessary. As demonstrated in the literature, this approach aligns with global trends in constructivist and critical education theory, emphasizing the development of independent thinking, collaborative learning, and meaningful engagement (Freire 2000; Weimer 2013; Hossain 2020). Locally, however, the persistence of teacher-dominated classrooms, exam-focused instruction, and rote learning continues to limit the potential of learners to become active participants in their education (Akanda and Haque 2025; Hossain and Younus 2025).

The mismatch between intended curriculum and implemented pedagogy has created a significant barrier to achieving equitable learning outcomes. While national policy documents promote inclusive and participatory methods, many teachers lack confidence with modern tools and student driven strategies. Hossain and Al Younus (2025) found that although teachers express interest in integrating digital tools like ChatGPT into English language writing instruction, they are often uncertain about aligning such technologies with pedagogical goals. This uncertainty reflects deeper gaps in digital literacy and methodological training.

In parallel, the dominance of English medium instruction in secondary and tertiary institutions has created an uneven playing field for students who lack adequate linguistic support. Hasan, Yesmin, and Hossain (2024) report that students in non-English departments often struggle more with speaking and academic writing compared to their peers in English majors, highlighting the systemic disparities that result from rigid and top-down instructional models.

3.5. Stakeholder role in implementing educational change

Achieving sustainable pedagogical reform in the Bangladeshi secondary education system requires coordinated action from all major stakeholders. Teachers are central to this change, but their efforts must be supported by institutional and systemic frameworks. Effective implementation of student-centered methods depends on robust professional development programs, especially in the areas of classroom facilitation, digital integration, and reflective practice (Haque 2025; Hossain 2021). However, teacher readiness remains uneven. For example, Hossain and Al Younus (2025) found that while many teachers show a willingness to use generative AI tools like ChatGPT in writing instruction, they often lack training on how to integrate them meaningfully into communicative and student-led pedagogy.

Administrators play a key role in providing the resources, scheduling flexibility, and support systems that enable such innovation. They must ensure that schools have functioning technology, opportunities for peer mentoring, and space for teachers to reflect on and refine new practices.

Students, too, must be repositioned as active participants in their learning. Peer interaction, group work, and project-based tasks become most effective when students are encouraged to take initiative and ownership. This requires assessment systems and class structures that reward effort, creativity, and participation. In this regard, Hasan, Yesmin, and Hossain (2024) note the importance of differentiated strategies in language instruction to close the performance gap between students from different academic backgrounds.

Finally, parents and guardians should be brought into the conversation through community forums and awareness programs. Many still associate quality education with discipline, teacher control, and exam performance, which can lead to resistance against more participatory and exploratory teaching models (Paul et al. 2021).

Reform will only succeed when all parties work toward a shared vision of education that values student agency, social inclusion, and future-ready skills.

3.6. Policy recommendations and implementation strategies

To ensure the successful adoption of student-centered pedagogy across Bangladesh's secondary education system, policy-level interventions must accompany classroom-level changes. First, teacher training institutions should revise their curricula to include modules on

constructivist learning, digital integration, and reflective practice. Professional development should be ongoing and tailored to contextual classroom challenges, including large class sizes, limited resources, and technological disparities (Haque 2025; Shohel and Kirkwood 2012).

Second, the assessment system should move beyond high-stakes summative exams and incorporate formative assessments, oral presentations, group work, and project-based tasks. These shifts will reduce students' dependence on rote memorization and encourage critical thinking and engagement (Weimer 2013; Hossain 2020).

Third, policymakers must allocate a budget for improving infrastructure, including digital tools, flexible classroom design, and student-friendly learning spaces. Schools in rural and underserved areas should receive targeted support to reduce the urban-rural implementation gap.

Finally, community and parental engagement are essential. Local education authorities should organize regular forums to explain the benefits of participatory pedagogy and alleviate concerns rooted in exam-centered or authoritarian models. As Paul et al. (2021) suggest, engaging guardians early helps reduce cultural resistance and builds a shared vision for change.

These steps require not only political will and funding but also a commitment to inclusivity, innovation, and long-term teacher support. Without structural reform, pedagogical change at the classroom level will remain fragmented and unsustainable.

4. Summary of the key findings and implications

The review of global and local research confirms that student-centered pedagogy, grounded in constructivist and critical theories, enhances learner engagement, autonomy, and performance. However, the classroom realities in Bangladesh reflect deeply rooted obstacles, including teacher resistance, infrastructural challenges, outdated assessment systems, and cultural expectations favoring authoritative instruction.

Despite these constraints, research shows growing awareness among Bangladeshi educators of the need for participatory teaching. Recent studies suggest that group work, peer collaboration, and reflective teaching are gaining traction, particularly in language instruction (Hossain 2020; Hossain and Younus 2025). These findings point to a window of opportunity for targeted reforms.

The implications are clear: systemic change is required to align instructional practice with pedagogical theory. Such reform must focus on teacher training, curriculum restructuring, inclusive assessment models, and community engagement. Only through coordinated efforts can Bangladesh move toward a more equitable and future-ready education system.

5. Conclusion

This reflective essay has examined the necessity and feasibility of implementing student-centered pedagogy in the secondary education system of Bangladesh. Drawing from constructivist, sociocultural, and critical pedagogical theories, the discussion highlighted the urgent need to shift away from traditional, teacher-dominated instruction toward more participatory, inclusive, and engaging classroom practices. Global and local literature reveals that while student-centered education fosters deeper learning and autonomy, its implementation in Bangladesh faces significant obstacles, including large class sizes, outdated assessment systems, inadequate teacher training, and infrastructural limitations.

Despite these challenges, the essay outlines a coherent rationale for pedagogical change and proposes a collaborative reform model involving teachers, administrators, students, policymakers, and guardians. Through targeted policy interventions, curriculum reform, and community engagement, it is possible to reshape classroom environments that empower learners, value their voices, and support their cognitive and social development.

To meet the demands of the twenty-first century, Bangladesh's education system must commit to systemic change that not only enhances academic outcomes but also cultivates the critical thinking, empathy, and creativity needed in a democratic society.

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