

On Saturday, August 13, 2022, Kathuli Government Primary School was abuzz with excitement, especially for the children in Class 4 (fourth grade)—“Sir” had returned to teach them, and he brought with him the first foreign visitor most of the students had ever seen. As he entered the school grounds, the children rushed to greet him with giggles and big smiles, pushing each other out of the way to vie for a prime position.



Asif Ahmed at the Training of Master Trainers (TMTE) program; one of the long-term aims of the 14-week course is to support a local cadre of trainers for ongoing, cascaded trainings.



Asif stands in front of Kathuli Government Primary School in Radhagobindapur, Bangladesh, where he currently teaches English to Class 2, 4, and 5 students. He also teaches Islam and Moral Education.

The school is located in Radhagobindapur, a remote village in the Meherpur District of Khulna, on the border with India. The village’s adult residents are farmers, many illiterate. “Sir,” otherwise known as Asif Ahmed, has come today after a two-month absence due to his participation in a British Council training course in Jashore city. He has clearly missed his students and wants to show his colleagues and the visitor what he has learned. The children are eager to participate in a jazz chant, a running dictation, and a picture chain drill activity, even though their skills are low—in part because of Asif’s absence and also because of a two-year loss of classes during the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the sum is greater than these parts can describe: there is a deep love and trust in this teacher–student relationship that emanates hope. No training can teach this; it is something that can be honed only by a connection to one’s calling—to teach.

When Asif graduated from high school in 1995, though, he had no plans to become a teacher. He was always interested in English, motivated by the BBC World Service’s *NewsHour* that he listened to daily on the eight-band radio he bought with his

savings, but he never thought of teaching it. His parents hoped he would do something classically heroic, such as become an Air Force pilot or a Navy officer, since his father was a noncommissioned officer for the Border Guard Bangladesh.

In the end, Asif decided to study English literature at the Meherpur campus of National University. Still, he felt directionless until he took a poetry class from Mr. Kabir Rana that changed everything. Mr. Rana spoke about books and poems he had read and the titles of songs. He encouraged his students to spend their money on works of great literature. Asif suddenly began reading voraciously in the university library—poems and then short stories in anthologies from the Library of Congress and the Asiatic Society and entries in *World Book Encyclopedia*. He especially loved the poetry of John Keats and William Wordsworth and poems in his native Bangla. He felt that these works of art gave his life meaning and inspiration, as did long conversations with his professor. Then it dawned on him: “I can be a teacher; I can inspire others like Mr. Rana inspired me.” Now, he beams proudly, “Today I have more books on my shelf than I have shirts or pants in my almirah!”

**Asif’s experiences in the English in Action program
gave him his first taste of being a trainer;
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and its implications for rural Bangladeshi youth abroad.**

After graduating in 2003, Asif became an English language lecturer at a newly established local college. During his seven-year tenure there, his students had the highest pass rates in the district on the Higher Secondary Certificate Examination twice—exceptional results for a village college. His colleagues attribute this success to his creative teaching. He used communicative language games such as Password, I Spy, Who Am I?, and chain stories to encourage his students to speak on their own without the need to memorize, which is the norm in Bangladesh. And because there was no government funding, he was doing all of this for free.

To support his family, he also tutored small groups of students. His older brother, a teacher, recognized Asif’s talent for teaching and told him to apply for a position at a primary school. After completing the compulsory one-year Certificate in Education course at the regional Primary Teachers Training Institute, he was assigned to teach English, because of his honor’s degree in English, to Class 5 (fifth grade). Taking on Class 5 is an important responsibility, as students must take the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE). He admits that, ironically, his students’ greatest achievement was that no one failed the exam, in stark contrast to previous years.

Asif attributes this success to creating a positive relationship with his students. He did this by telling them stories—Aesop’s fables and folktales in Bangla were favorites—and singing songs every day to involve them in class. Outside of class, he tried to get the children interested in extracurricular activities such as sports, art, and music. These activities in and out of the classroom helped him gain

the children’s trust and love and caused them to attend school more regularly.

Asif explains that children frequently miss school for a variety of reasons. The main reason is that they need to contribute economically to their families, often working with their parents in the fields, tending to animals, or working as rickshaw drivers. He adds that classes often do not address the immediate needs of these children, and therefore they find classes uninteresting. Although teachers have freedom to deliver content to students in different ways, the content itself is mandated.

In 2012, success snowballed for Asif. Local administrators started to recognize his talent. He was recommended by the Education Officer for a Teacher Facilitator position with English in Action, a nine-year collaboration between the Bangladesh and U.K. governments to provide young Bangladeshis access to economic opportunities through English. According to statistics, many male youth in Bangladesh leave school at age 15 to work in the Middle East. After a rigorous selection process, Asif got the job. This involved training cohorts of 24 local teachers in new methodologies and conducting teachers’ development meetings after they tried out new techniques in their classroom. Each meeting took place quarterly, giving teachers time to practice and reflect.

Asif’s experiences in the English in Action program gave him his first taste of being a trainer; he loved the teamwork, the practicality of the program, and its implications for rural Bangladeshi youth abroad. However, his most important takeaway was that English classes could

be conducted in English. Because of his participation in English in Action, he was invited to be an English subject-based trainer in his subdistrict.

In 2020, Asif was awarded Teacher of the Year of Meherpur District. He played down this distinction because teachers must apply to be selected. However, he admits he would not have done it without the encouragement of a local instructor, Mahbubur Rahman, and the head teacher, Tarifa Najmina, at the time.

He lists his achievements: 100 percent of his students passed the PECE for three consecutive years (most failing scores were due to English and Math); two of these students received scholarships to attend high school; and he earned the confidence of his colleagues in his teaching, as they made him an unofficial consultant. Moreover, the award committee was impressed with the picture dictionary he created featuring vocabulary from *English for Today*, the national textbook; he plans to publish the dictionary. Asif explains, “I thought writing a dictionary using pictures to teach 500 high-frequency words would be of much help for both the learners

and teachers. I took example sentences from online newspapers, books, movies, or simply translating some Bangla sentences used in real-life communication.”

Around the same time, the Directorate of Primary Education was recruiting teachers for a project with British Council called Training of Master Trainers in English, or TMTE. It is a 14-week intensive course in English language and teacher development with a microteaching component facilitated by two international trainers. One of its long-term aims is to support a local cadre of trainers for cascaded trainings. Asif was a natural choice to participate. However, due to the pandemic, the course was postponed.

Teaching during the pandemic was extremely difficult, and instruction was nonexistent for most of his students because of poor internet connections, the unavailability of devices, and the lack of skills to use the devices they did have. Only two of his 25 students from Class 5 were able to attend his classes on Google Meet for one hour a day in the evenings. In fact, he was one of the first teachers in his district to give lessons online. During the lockdown, the



Asif assists a group of his Class 4 students with a chain drill activity, in which students repeat key vocabulary in a fun and meaningful context.

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district education office created a YouTube channel and a Facebook page dedicated to learning, to which Asif and others contributed lessons in English and other subjects. Asif also trained many teachers in his district to use Zoom and Google Meet to teach online or attend important meetings—sometimes over 40 teachers at a time.

The day finally came when he was called up to join 43 other primary teachers in Cohort 4 of TMTE in Jashore from June 2022 until the beginning of September. He said that this program helped him fine-tune his skills. Before this course, Asif used innovative techniques he learned from trainings and from his own creativity responding to the needs of his students. Now, he feels he has a systematic approach and more techniques for communicative language teaching to draw from. “Whatever you do in the classroom, it should have a definite purpose,” he says. “It should be enjoyable, but educational, too. I will not let the textbooks dictate as I did before.”

Since he has returned to the classroom after TMTE, Asif describes his classes as livelier and more student-centered. He is teaching the songs that he learned during the course and playing vocabulary games with the children, like Touch the Board and Picture Chain Drill, adapted to the students’ level. One thing he is proud of is creating low-cost teaching materials. He is even practicing his drawing skills to teach vocabulary. “It’s not possible for me to manage all sorts of materials, but if I can draw well, I can teach well,” he explains, adding, “Class 2 has already learned animal names and habitats from my drawings!”

What does the future hold for Asif? He wants to write more books for students,

one centered on vocabulary and the other an easy grammar guide with illustrations. When asked what he would like to tell *English Teaching Forum* readers about education in Bangladesh, he replied, “To the millions of poor Bangladeshis, education is life-saving oxygen; it is their bread and butter. Whatever they think, do, or earn, they depend on primary education because this is the only education they will receive in their entire life. Therefore, Bangladesh is trying to ensure that every citizen of the country receives free compulsory primary education. The country has shown tremendous success in reducing the rates of dropouts. Now we are trying to ensure quality education. Teachers are respected everywhere in the country and often called the nation builders.”

Definitely the words of a true hero.

This article was written by **Wendy Coulson**.

Wendy was an English Language Fellow in Medellín, Colombia, in 2017–2018, and as a Specialist she has served in Jordan and Tunisia—where she worked with Libyan teachers—and served virtually in Mexico. She is an international ELT consultant who creates curriculum and teacher-training programs specializing in young learners and low-resource environments. Her most recent projects include American Councils for International Education’s English Speaking Nation program as a coach in Uzbekistan and British Council Bangladesh’s TMTE program as a teacher trainer, where she had the great pleasure of meeting Asif, visiting his students in their school, and working with other dedicated Bangladeshi English teachers.

Photos by Wendy Coulson