TEACHING ASSISTANTS (TAs) FOR ENHANCING STUDENTS SOFT SKILLS: A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY SCENARIO

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Abstract: In the developed countries around the world, for helping both the teachers and students in academia, the concept of Teaching Assistance is a very familiar one. Though this practice is very rare in Bangladeshi context, but it prevails in some of the leading private universities. Teaching assistants have to have an interest in education, a patient, non-judgmental attitude because the primary role of the teaching assistants is to work with teachers to raise the learning and attainment of students so that they can access the curriculum, participate in learning and experience a sense of achievement. This paper aimed to find out teachers' and students' perceptions about the efficacies and role of Teaching Assistants for developing students' soft skills at Private Universities in Bangladesh. 10 teachers and 150 students from a leading private university had been selected for collecting data. Interview questions for the teachers and survey questionnaire for the students had been used. As a theoretical framework this study used Lev Vygotsky's theory of Zone of proximal Development. Teachers' interview data reflects that TAs can lead to improvements in students' skills, and they also have positive effects in reducing stress or workload of the teachers. It is also found from students' responses that the TAs help them in learning and course management. From the findings of the study, it can be recommended that, as the practice of teaching assistance is helping both the teachers and students; other tertiary institutions can incorporate it in their own institutions.

Keywords: Teaching Assistance, private universities, tertiary education, students' soft skills

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Teaching assistance is a very familiar concept in the developed countries throughout the world. Though this concept yet has not been flourished in Bangladeshi context, especially in the public universities, but it is matter of hope that the concept of Teaching Assistance does prevail in some of the leading private universities in Bangladesh. Students who serve as teaching assistants are supposed to have certain qualities such as; leadership skills, interpersonal skills such as resourcefulness, giving and receiving feedback, working with diverse populations, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. As the TAs have these qualities and they are helping both the students and teachers in academia, it would be very helpful if they help the students in developing their soft skills. According to Gillard (2009), in order to be successful in job sector, excellent soft skills are essential requirements (as cited in Attakorn et al, 2013). A perfect blend of personal qualities, soft skills and hard skills will definitely contribute to enhancing graduate

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employability. It is often said that hard skills will enable individuals to obtain an interview but soft skills enable individuals to secure a job (Wye & Lim, 2009). In the private universities, most of the teachers need to take a lot class and in their office hours, it is not possible for them to deal with the problems of each and every student. But in the universities where TA ship prevails, TAs are helping the teachers in reducing stress or workload of the teachers. TAs give office hours for dealing or counseling the students regarding their problems.

So, it is important to find out both the teachers' and students' perception about the importance of TAs for enhancing students' soft skills from a private tertiary institution where TA ship is already prevailing to get the actual scenario.

1.2 Central Research Questions

This paper has the following central research questions:

- What are the teachers' perceptions about the efficacies of Teaching Assistants in developing students' soft skills?

- What are the students' perceptions about the role of Teaching Assistants in developing students' soft skills?

1.3 Limitations

While conducting the study, it was found that there was not sufficient literature available related to the study, not only in Bangladeshi context but also in other EFL countries. There has been very little or no research at all, at least to our best knowledge, on the importance of TAs for enhancing students' soft skills. The current study hopefully will bring some insights about the issue. Because of the time constraints, it was not possible to collect data from all the universities where TA ship already exists, so only one private university on the basis of personal contact and convenience has been selected to collect data. However, it is hoped that this study will present a representative picture of the importance of TAs for developing students' soft skills in the private universities in Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Education System of Bangladesh and Tertiary Level

The education system of Bangladesh may be broadly divided into three stages: Primary, Secondary and Higher Education. Primary education is imparted in Primary School, secondary education in High Schools and Intermediate Colleges and higher education in Degree Colleges and Universities (Education Ministry of Bangladesh in Khan and Akter, 2011). Autonomous public Universities, private Universities, Madrasah and colleges under the National Universities are the four different types of Educational institutions at tertiary level (ibid).

2.2 Soft skills and its importance

Soft skills include skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving, leadership, interpersonal relationships, and professionalism, among others.

Mastering soft skills is a process. A famous simple definition of Soft Skills comes from the winner of the Nobel Prize 2000 for Economics James Heckman: "Soft Skills predict success in life" (as cited in Cimatti, 2016). Soft skills are necessary for students to succeed in education, job training, independent living, community participation, and, ultimately, in the workplace. Soft Skills are also essential for a candidate when he/she tries to obtain any kind of job. Employers generally hire new employees, in particular recent graduates, taking more in consideration their Soft Skills than their Hard Skill (Cimatti, 2016). Surveys on employers indicate that soft skills are often vital in securing entry-level employment and in being successful in the workplace (Maile, 2013).

2.3 TAs and developing students' soft skills

It is found from the DISS project that teaching assistants help in developing 'soft' skills such as confidence, motivation and dispositions toward learning. Studies on pupils' perceptions of teaching assistant attributes suggest that they have the requisite qualities associated with nurturing such skills: patience, sensitivity, empathy, approachability, attentiveness and a sense of humour (Dunne, Goddard & Woodhouse, 2008; Fraser & Meadows, 2008 as cited in Whitehorn, 2010).

Other studies reported that there is a direct positive impact on pupil progress when teaching assistants are prepared and trained, and have appropriate support and guidance (Alborz et al, 2009; Slavin et al, 2009 as cited in Webster & Blatchford, 2012). According to Fraser & Meadows, (2008) students perceive the role of the TA to be of value and their work to be useful and helpful. To them TAs' work in general and in relation to themselves were clear and insightful. Most of the students consider themselves to be confident and willing to ask for help to the TAs.

The DISS study claimed that the teachers get in terms of their workloads, job satisfaction and levels of stress, largely as a result of support from the TAs. In terms of the effects on teaching, the DISS project also showed that the presence of TAs had benefits in terms of classroom control, leading to a reduction in the amount of talk from adults addressing negative behaviour. This is an important contribution by TAs and should not be underestimated (Webster & Blatchford, 2012).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study has been conducted using a mix method design. The researcher incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain data from students and teachers. A mixed method is a procedure used to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative research to understand the problem identified in the study (Creswell, 2008).

The setting of the study was both formal and semi-formal. Students' data had been collected in a formal setting and teachers' data had been collected in semi-formal setting with certain guidelines. 10 teachers and 150 students from one of the leading private universities had been selected as research sample to collect data for the study based on the personal contact and convenience.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Lev Vygosky's (1978) theory of "Zone of Proximal Development" and Wood and Middleton's (1975) theory of "Scaffolding". The zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been defined as: "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

So, the concept of the More Knowledgeable Other is integrally related to the theory of Zone of Proximal Development. This is an important concept that relates to the difference between what can be achieved independently and what can be achieved with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. Here, TAs can act as the skilled partner. Students know about these skills, they just need to be made conscious about the importance of these skills in their professional or academic life. They just need a little coaching and scaffolding from a "More Knowledgeable Other" to help them and here the TAs can play the role of More Knowledgeable Other. Scaffolding (i.e. assistance) is most effective when the support is matched to the needs of the learner. As the TAs know about the problem or lacking of the students, they can help the students' by providing with appropriate support at the right moments, so students are able to achieve these soft skills.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Data from teachers and students have been collected, tabulated and analyzed. At first all the data, both open-ended and close-ended questions, from students' survey have been counted and teachers' interview, which is basically a qualitative study, are explained and analyzed in a descriptive manner. After that the examined information has been connected to the central research question.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1 Findings from Students' Questionnaire

Question	Response
1. Students' understanding about soft skills	• 50% students' mentioned that by soft skills they understand the way of communication and oral skills. • 30% mentioned about discipline, punctuality, time management, behavior, body language and manner as soft skills. • 20% said leadership quality, qualities that are essential for job market survival is soft skills.
2. Whether developing soft skills is important for academic purpose or not	• All of the students' answered that developing soft skills is important for academic purpose mentioning different reasons. Developing soft skills is important for doing better in presentation, for communicating with others especially the teachers; it helps them to be punctual, organized, confident and more expressive.

3. Whether developing soft skills is important for employability	All of them mentioned that developing soft skills is very important for employability. • 45% mentioned that employers check time management, punctuality, discipline and presentation skills. • 55% said that developing soft skills is important to represent one smartly and confidently. Because in job sector they face lots of difficulties and in order to survive, to compete with others and to become successful these skills are important.
4. Whether TAs can help in developing soft skills or not	All of the students answered positively that the TAs are helpful to develop their soft skills and elaborated how the TAs help them in this respect. • 60% of them mentioned that they feel comfortable to share their weakness to the TAs and TAs can give them helpful suggestions. • 40% of the students mentioned that TAs can guide them well identifying lacking as the TAs are also students like them.
5. How the TAs can Help students' to develop their soft skills	All of the students mentioned several ways about how the TAs can help them to develop their soft-skills. • Teach with different techniques • By giving interesting tasks and individual feedback • By suggesting the easy way to overcome their shortcomings • Providing friendly behavior
6. Whether students' prefer meeting the TAs	All the students said that they prefer meeting the TAs because • TAs are like elder brother/sister to them • TAs are more experienced than them so they can help them in developing soft skills • They have long office hours, so they are easily available to share problem.
7. Whether they feel comfortable meeting the TAs than the teachers	• 95% of the students answered that they feel more comfortable to share their problems with the TAs because they do not feel nervous to meet the TAs as they do so to meet with the faculties. • 5% of the students mentioned that they do not feel comfortable meeting the TAs because sometimes TAs are not available in office hours.

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4.2 Findings from Teachers' Interview

Question	Response
1. Whether developing soft skills is important for the students or not	All of the teachers mentioned that developing soft skills is important for both academic and professional purpose. • Now-a -days, in private universities, there is not only written based examination; there is also group work/pair work, class participation, assignment, presentation/group presentation for the students. In order to do well in all these, developing soft skills is important. • Leadership and teamwork skills are also essential in academia. Soft skills are needed for the students to become punctual and disciplined in their daily schedule. • In professional sector, soft skills will assist the students in becoming an integral part of the institution they will work for and here students who have good communication skills get priority than the students with higher cgpa but poor communication skills.
2. Whether TAs can help the students in developing soft skills or not	• Most of the teachers mentioned that the TAs can help the students in developing their soft skills. Sometimes the TAs can influence the students more than the teachers. It is because students sometimes feel comfortable in interacting with the TAs than the teachers. • As the TAs are students and also working at the same time, it will be more convenient for them to guide the students about how soft skills can influence someone's students and professional lives. • TAs have a office hour and students have to meet them in this particular office hour, so they need to maintain the time. It helps the students to be punctual and develop time management skill. Normally, TAs sit in common room, so students need to approach and communicate with them in a formal and polite way.
3. What the TAs should do in developing soft skills of the students	Teachers have mentioned that • TAs should interact more with the students to make them free, comfortable and reduce anxiety and public speaking fear. • They can ask the students to consult with them on a regular basis to make them punctual and disciplined. • They can make it mandatory for the students to speak in English to improve their communication skills. • Initially the TAs can help the students in developing soft skills for academic purpose, and then at the end of their program (in 11/12 semester) TAs can help the students in developing soft skills for their professional purpose.

4. How the TAs can help the teachers in developing students soft skills	• As the TAs deal the students individually, so they are aware about their individual problems or weaknesses. They can notify the teachers to give emphasize on these problems. • TAs can help the teachers by providing supplementary activities based on negotiation, communication, problem solving skills, so that the teachers can implement these activities in the classroom to develop students' soft skills. • Sometimes the TAs can help the teachers in classroom management especially in case of large class during group work. They can monitor whether all the students are participating or not.
5. Instruction to the TAs for helping the students	• TAs should be instructed to maintain friendly relationship with the students so that they can share their problems with the TAs. • TAs should be instructed to keep record about the individual development of the students. • Teachers can do a need analysis of the students, and then can instruct the TAs to work on these problems.
6. Whether students can share their problems to the TAs than the teachers or not	• All of the teachers said that it actually depends on the relationship between the TAs and students, how dedicated the TAs are, how they treat the students, how much attention the TAs give to the students. • With the teachers, students maintain a formal relationship but with the TAs they maintain a semi-formal relationship; so they are more comfortable and share their problems easily with the TAs. • As the TAs are also students, so the TAs and students have a shared identity and students can easily relate themselves to the TAs.
7. What kind of training or workshops should be organized to train the TAs	Most of the teachers said that • Behavioral training should be given to the TAs on how to deal with the students. • Specialized training should be given to the TAs on how to maintain friendly relationship with the students so that they can come and share their problems with them.

4.3 Discussion

It is found form the findings that both the teachers and students think that developing soft skills is important for both academic and professional purpose because time management skill, punctuality, discipline, leadership quality, team working capability is equally important for both of the sectors. In case of employability, employers will check these skills than the CGPA. Here, TAs can help the students in developing these soft skills

because TAs are also students and they share a common identity with the students, students feel comfortable in interacting with the TAs than the teachers. As the TAs deal with individual students, so teachers expect that the TAs will help them by identifying individual problems of the students and inform the teachers about this and the students also prefer meeting the TAs for getting individual feedback. So, the findings of the study can be connected with the theoretical framework of the study. Because in Vygosky's (1978) theory of "Zone of Proximal Development" and Wood and Middleton's (1975) theory of "Scaffolding", there is a need for assistance from the more knowledgeable other and it is also found from the findings that TAs are giving assistance by being a MKO to the students for developing their soft skills. Because it is not enough for the students to possess academic knowledge and good grades, it is also important for them to demonstrate their soft skills, particularly those that are highly desired by employers. As teachers cannot counsel each and every student individually for developing their soft skills because of their time scarcity and other responsibilities, TAs can help them in this regard. By giving motivational and positive feedback, TAs can redirect students towards positive behaviors, and help students to keep their own focus toward the positive. However, it is also found from the study that not all the TAs are capable enough for helping the students in developing their soft skills, so TAs should also be given specialized training to make them competent so that they can help the students to develop their soft skills.

5. Recommendation & Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned discussion it can be stated that

1. Tertiary institution especially the private one should incorporate TAship in their institution for helping their students for developing their soft skills.

2. There should have an intensive training program for the TAs that should expand at least for one semester. Then only the selective TAs who are capable enough for helping the students should be assigned.

3. There should have cooperation between the TAs and teachers in regards of setting learning goals or selecting materials and activities that can help the students in developing their soft skills.

4. TAs need to be approachable. They should have a friendly attitude towards students, and encouraging students to visit them in their office hours with their problems. Then, they need to make sure that their office hours are at times their students can actually attend.

5. TAs should make the students conscious about the importance of soft skills in terms of their employability and they need to take much care when the students are almost at the end of their program.

So, on the basis of the aforementioned literature review and the study findings, we would have to conclude that, TAs are as effective as they could be. As the TAs are more experienced and get more exposure than the students, so it is possible by providing them with right kind of training to make them competent and to help the students in developing their soft skills.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

- What is your perception about the importance of developing soft skills among the students?
- Do you think, TAs can help the students in developing students' soft skills?
- What the TAs should do in developing students' soft skills?
- How the TAs can help the teachers in developing students' soft skills?
- How do you instruct your TAs to help the students in developing their soft skills?
- Do you think, students can share their problems to the TAs than the teachers?
- What kind of workshop/training should be organized for the TAs so that they can help the students in developing their soft skills?

Survey Questionnaire

- What do you understand by 'Soft Skill'?
- Do you think developing soft skills is important for your academic purpose?
- Do you think developing soft skills is important for employability?
- Do you think TAs can help you in developing your soft skills?
- How the TAs can assist you in developing your soft skills?
- Do you prefer meeting the TAs to solve your problems?
- Do you feel more comfortable to meet the TAs than the teachers in regards developing your soft skills?