

Studying clinical linguistics as an independent discipline in Bangladesh: A post-hoc needs analysis from the perspectives of learners

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Abstract

Clinical linguistics is the application of linguistic theories and methods to the study of causes, nature and treatment processes of different types of speech and language disorders. In this study, the importance of studying clinical linguistics in the higher academic institutions of Bangladesh was analysed as it deals with a severe problem existing in our society. This study was conducted following a qualitative approach to collect relevant data that would justify the objectives accordingly. The participants of this study were 16 students, studying at the master's level in the Department of Linguistics, University of Dhaka, who studied clinical linguistics as a full compulsory course at their undergraduate level. The participants were interviewed individually and an open-ended questionnaire was used to extract data from them. The findings of this research suggest that society needs graduates of clinical linguistics to serve the nation by combating speech and language disorders. The majority of the participants (75%) were in favour of developing a new associated department named 'Communication Disorders' or 'Clinical Linguistics' as an extension of the study of the applied field of linguistics. They explained that the new department would produce skilled graduates or expert in speech and language therapists to serve the nation properly in the context of communication health of the masses. Like any other linguistic community throughout the world, our society is also sensitive to speech as well as language disorders. Therefore, the universities

of Bangladesh must take immediate initiatives to introduce clinical linguistics either as a full course under linguistics or in a separate department to produce skilled graduates.

Keywords: *Linguistics, Clinical Linguistics, Communication Disorders, Speech-language Pathology*

1.Introduction

Clinical linguistics is a peripheral branch of linguistics dealing with the application of linguistic theories and methods to identify the cause and nature of various types of speech-language and communication disorders. It also explains different pragmatic therapies and treatment processes which can help disordered persons get rid of the communication problems they are facing at any age. It is indeed a European approach to patho-linguistic interpretation to fulfil the above area. The academia of Bangladesh also welcomes clinical linguistics as a potential subject under the spectrum of linguistics, an independent discipline as well as in the first and second decades of the twenty-first century respectively. The present paper attempts to evaluate the necessity of studying clinical linguistics in the higher academic institutions of Bangladesh since it deals with an acute problem in society, especially the communication health of persons living in the Bangladeshi community. Learners of this field will also get an overview of their professional scope and potentiality from this work. Universities, which are interested to open this department or conducting this course, can also get some idea. In short, this paper can contribute to creating some scope at least to know and learn whoever is interested to serve in this arena, because it is also concerned with serving humanity in a broader sense.

2. Clinical Linguistics: A Branch of Linguistics

Because of adding the term ‘Linguistics’, in its ultimate meaning, the jargon ‘Clinical Linguistics’ indicates a branch of theoretical linguistics. As a sub-section of linguistics, it mainly incorporates a secondary domain of language study with particular reference to speech and language disorders. To execute this properly, it arguably applies numerous theories and methods developed in the core domains of linguistics, for instance - phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Thus, it can be considered a true penny-ante approach to the study of language science.

a. Origin of clinical linguistics

Clinical linguistics is a European academic term for studying different patho-linguistic aspects of human beings (Arif, 2013). Though it was first coined by David Crystal, an English-origin European linguist, in 1981 (Ball, Perkins, Müller, & Howard 2008; Perkins 2011), now it is widely being practised in different universities in continental Europe. Müller & Ball (2013) state that as an academic endeavour, clinical linguistics is derived from communication disorders, an American-based and practice-oriented academic interpretation of human communication disorders. They also state that though the discipline ‘communication disorders’ is regarded as the pioneer of clinical linguistics, as an academic field it emphasises linguistics, especially phonetics to unfold various articulation and phonological disorders exhibited by persons with speech disorders.

b. Defining clinical linguistics: Nature and characteristics

Clinical linguistics is a discipline of linguistics that studies language impairments using linguistic concepts and theories. Although this field's conceptual foundations are in linguistics, its sphere of application is the wide range of clinical diseases that might impair language use and comprehension. An assessment of specific linguistic deficiencies in patients with different neurodevelopmental disorders can address both elements of clinical linguistics. Clinical linguists are interested in the complete spectrum of linguistic abnormalities in these disorders, such as phonetic deficits in children with cleft lip and palate, morphosyntactic errors in children with particular language impairment, and pragmatic language impairments in adults with aphasia. A wide range of tools and approaches are used by clinical linguists and speech-language pathologists to assess, diagnose, and treat individuals with language disorders.

To introduce an applied branch of linguistics, David Crystal provides a definition of clinical linguistics, which contains its very basic characteristics. Crystal considers, "Clinical linguistics is the application of theories, methods, and findings of linguistics (including phonetics) to the study of those clinical situations where disorders of language are diagnosed and treated." (1984:31). According to Cummings, "Clinical linguistics is the study of the numerous ways in which the unique human capacity for language can be disordered. This includes 'language disorders', as standardly conceived. However, it also includes disorders that result from a disruption to the wider processes of language transmission and reception and disorders of the vegetative functions that are an evolutionary precursor to language. Most notably, it includes all the disorders that are encountered by speech and language therapists across a range of clinical contexts." (2008: 1). In the meantime, many theoreticians

and practitioners of clinical linguistics all over the world have also given definitions of this branch of linguistics from which its basic underlying features can be elicited. For example, Perkins and Howard state, “Clinical linguistics involves the study of how language and communication may be impaired. In its narrowest and most applied sense, it focuses on the use of linguistics to describe, analyse, assess, diagnose and treat communication disorders” (2015: 111).

Clinical linguistics draws on the conceptual resources of the full range of linguistic disciplines to describe and explain language disorders. These disciplines include phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse. Each of these linguistic disciplines contributes concepts and theories that can shed light on the nature of language disorders (Cummings, 2017).

These representative definitions give rise to the following primary natures and characteristics of clinical linguistics.

1. It is an applied field of theoretical linguistics,
2. It applies theories and techniques of linguistics to explain, assess and diagnose language and communication problems encountered by language users, and
3. It helps provide therapies to treat persons’ speech and language deficiencies.

Besides, Arif (2014), in the light of a definition proposed by Garman (1996), also identifies some fundamental features of clinical linguistics that can be mentioned here. He states that clinical linguistics describes pathological linguistic data in terms of linguistic norms standardised in different core branches of linguistics like phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. At the same time, it is also a remedial

science because it explains different drills and therapies to apply to the patients with communication disorders to get recovered.

c. Clinical linguistics as an applied science

The definition expressed by crystal and the typical features mentioned above regard clinical linguistics as an applied field of theoretical linguistics since it incorporates the theories and methods of phonetics and other core linguistic attempts to diagnose and treat persons suffering from speech and language disorders.

In this sense, clinical linguistics can also be identified as an *applied science* of theoretical linguistics. Now, what does an applied science mean? According to Weismer and Brown (2021: 5), an applied science “is research with more immediate clinical consequences, research with less distance between the results of a study and its potential use in clinical settings”. This definition implies an essential clinical setup and condition to research an applied science, which ultimately unfolds a scope to understand the nature of respective topics that are examined in a given clinical setting. Therefore, concerning this aspect, clinical linguistics is genuinely an applied science since the clinical setup is a pre-conditioned working procedure in this field. In addition, contemplating from a different perspective, clinical linguistics can be credited as ‘translational research’ because the result of basic science is optimally translated into the clinical application of this field (Weismer and Brown 2021). Here, the basic science is certainly theoretical linguistics.

d. Theoretical linguistics: A basic science

Theoretical linguistics is regarded as a basic science to demystify the underlying features of human language and its related

phenomena. First of all, it is a basic science because scientific approaches and techniques are applied to interpret these linguistic phenomena. Again, all sorts of theoretical frameworks and methods on the aspects of language and speech, and associated realities surrounding us are grounded in this academic endeavour. It indicates theoretical linguistics includes theory, a generalised statement of a specific phenomenon of the world (Adger, 2002). To form a theory, this generalised statement needs to turn into a philosophical introspection having followed a chronological scientific procedure. Thus, it ultimately creates an idealised and lawful proposition. In a nutshell, this is the procedure to make a theory of a phenomenon.

Now, to understand theoretical aspects of linguistics, let us imagine theoretical linguistics as a basket. Since this basket is full of theories made to explain numerous aspects of phoneme, morpheme, sentence, and meaning of a language, these arguably require further explanation and interpretation. Hence, students of theoretical linguistics do not enjoy it to the full extent in the classroom. Besides, thought-theories are made to interpret different social phenomena, a discipline with strong theoretical underpinning like linguistics lacks to fulfil the demand of the job market. As a result, a graduate of theoretical linguistics encounters much hardship in the competitive job market, both in the domestic and global context. Raskin (1986) mentions such a hardship faced by the graduates of linguistics in the USA and concludes that since students of ‘pure linguistics’ (here it is theoretical linguistics) are mainly trained with theoretical models and forms, they are virtually unemployable “in any alternative professional capacity” (1986: xiii). So, theoreticians of linguistics felt motivated to develop different applied fields of this discipline like clinical linguistics and so on.

e. Clinical linguistics: A field of the necessity for the society

Although clinical linguistics is classified as a peripheral branch in the whole spectrum of linguistics, it is considered an essential field of study that significantly contributes to the demand of society. As it is pointed out earlier that it deals with the problem of communication health of people, especially various forms of speech and language disorders. Concerning this issue, Fogle (2019) informs that in the USA one in seven children suffers from disorders with either speech, language or cognition, which eventually make obstacles to expressing him/herself or comprehending the others. Such terrific situations exist in every linguistic community throughout the world from time immemorial. Hence, an academic discipline like clinical linguistics is needed, as it describes the aspects of communication disorders and helps rehabilitate persons encountering these disorders. In such a prevalent reality, in the first quartile of the twentieth century, the education institutes of the USA started an independent academic programme named ‘Communication Disorders’ or ‘Speech and Language Pathology’, which was finally associated with theoretical linguistics as its peripheral branch in Europe and precisely termed as *Clinical Linguistics* by David Crystal in 1981. It is worth mentioning that the term *Communication Disorders* denotes a very broad academic approach that includes all sorts of disorders correlated with human communication and expression, whereas *Speech and Language Pathology* deals with explaining speech and language disorders, which is based on medical grounds and atmosphere. On the contrary, *Clinical Linguistics* discusses the previously mentioned disorders from the perspective of theoretical linguistics. But in practice, the main topics of these three disciplines not only overlap but also follow identical techniques and methodological

guidelines to collect data for research experiments. Thus, due to such overlapping nature of the topics of these three associated disciplines, the names of academic programmes offered by various higher education institutions are frequently interchanged.

f. Clinical linguistics in Bangladesh

Though Bangladesh lacks precise statistics as Fogle (2019) has mentioned above, it is assumed that the numbers of children and adult persons facing different communication disorders are increasing day by day. But the issues of human communication health of people, especially speech and language problems they suffer regularly are neglected in the medical sector of Bangladesh. Even the masses of the country are not conscious of these disorders at all, although an undergraduate programme in *Speech and Language Therapy* has been continuing for more than a decade at Bangladesh Health Profession Institute (BHPI), an affiliated institute of the University of Dhaka, at the premise of CRP, Savar, Dhaka.

Hence, the Department of Linguistics, University of Dhaka introduced the course *Clinical Linguistics* in the first decade of this century at the undergraduate level to make familiar the students with an emerging applied field of linguistics with the impression that they would understand the nature and types of speech and language disorders in the context of Bengali language, and make the masses aware of these disorders. Soon this course became very popular among the students who eagerly expressed their interest to know more about the topics of this course. So, there created a demand to introduce more courses in clinical linguistics, even to establish a separate department too.

Having observed this enormous response, the Department of Linguistics took the initiative to set up an independent department

of Clinical Linguistics to produce efficient and capable speech therapists who would serve the nation by both providing pragmatic therapies to the persons suffering from speech and language disorders and conducting research activities on this. Finally, it came into reality on April 1, 2015 when clinical linguistics started its journey as a new department with an associated name and identity *the Department of Communication Disorders* where Professor Hakim Arif was appointed as the Chair. It is worth mentioning that the newly established department has been named 'Communication Disorders' instead of 'Clinical Linguistics' with the impression that the new name would include the whole spectrum of human communication problems both verbal and non-verbal aspects in addition to including the topics of linguistics, especially theories and methods of theoretical linguistics to properly analyse pathological data of persons with speech and language disorders.

Proyash Institute of Special Education and Research (PISER) affiliated with Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP) also offers a BSc (Hons) degree in Audiology and Speech Language Pathology. The students of this institute are also working as professionals in different sectors of speech-language pathology across the country.

Considering the above background study including a brief theoretical as well as historical perspectives of Clinical Linguistics, the present paper investigates the potential of Clinical Linguistics to run as an independent area of study in the higher academic institutions in Bangladesh.

3.Method

This research has been conducted following the maxims of qualitative research methodology.

According to Dörnyei, Z. (2007: 24):

“Qualitative research involves data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analysed primarily by non-statistical methods.”

Qualitative research is defined as a research method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication. It also includes continuous and casual observation in both formal and informal settings. This methodology best suits the subject matter and span of this research. Since the study analyses the perception and views of the participants on different aspects of clinical linguistics, especially determining its importance in academia as well as in society, it follows a qualitative approach to collect relevant data that gives rise to a result to justify the objectives. The overall procedure of this approach is as follows:

a. Participants

Sixteen students studying at the master's level in the Department of Linguistics, University of Dhaka were selected as participants in this study. Alongside, the main inclusion criterion was the experience of studying clinical linguistics as a full compulsory course at the undergraduate level so that they acquire fundamental knowledge and skills in this branch of linguistics. Considering an ethical ground, the full names of the participants were abbreviated in this study.

b. Data collection procedure and stimuli

The participants were given an open-ended questionnaire, which includes seven questions (*Please see Annex I*). They were asked to answer all questions and return those to the author. Every

participant was allocated the time they needed to think freely to appropriately answer the questions. They were interviewed individually maintaining different schedules. All questions were mandatory to answer.

Before collecting data, the researcher had cross-checked and got the questions validated by a linguistic expert from the University of Dhaka to make the research reliable and worthwhile.

4.Results

The data collected by using the technique and procedure mentioned above were manipulated and categorised in different dimensions to get the expected result from this study. These are as follows:

The answer to the first question was quite straightforward because all participants informed that they studied clinical linguistics as a full compulsory course in the 8th semester at the undergraduate level. Importantly, in the universities in Bangladesh, the undergraduate programmes run for four years. It indicates that they studied this course in the last semester of the undergraduate programme. So, they were likely to recall all the basic stuff of this course they studied. The same thing happened to the answer to the second question. All participants pointed out that clinical linguistics is a branch of linguistics. Only two of them were advanced learners because they recognised this as a peripheral branch of theoretical linguistics. It symbolises that these two students were able to properly identify an emerging applied field of linguistics.

The third question was related to the expected topics of clinical linguistics. The answer to this question is categorised and presented in the following table 1.

Table 1: Topics of clinical linguistics

Topics→ ↓Participa nts	Autis m	Aphas ia	Dyslex ia	Dysgrap hia	SL I	Othe rs
UK	√	√	√	√	√	√
RS	√	√	√		√	
AS	√	√	√	√		√
JA	√	√	√	√	√	
KF	√	√	√	√	√	
RM	√	√	√		√	√
EH	√	√	√	√	√	√
SH	√	√	√	√		√
SC	√	√	√	√	√	√
SD	√	√	√		√	
AH	√	√	√	√		
SA	√	√	√	√	√	
JF	√	√	√		√	√
RR	√	√	√	√		√
SD	√	√	√			
SF	√	√	√	√	√	

Table 1 shows autism, aphasia, and dyslexia are very common topics of study in clinical linguistics because all participants included these. In the category ‘autism’ they exactly meant ‘speech and language problems of children with ‘autism’, as the author asked them to clarify this further. To them, dysgraphia and SLI are also relatively common topics of this course because a majority of them (11/16) mentioned these two. Finally, half of the total participants cited ‘others’ as the topics of clinical linguistics.

Such an answer can be found as a smart proposition by the participants. This is because, though they could not mention the specific names during the interview session, they were quite sure that clinical linguistics genuinely includes other topics too. The author addressed this issue to these participants to clarify further. They are quite right because as an applied field, clinical linguistics includes other essential topics like the human nervous system, speech and language issues of different disorders such as down syndrome, cerebral palsy, therapy, rehabilitation techniques and process, etc.

The fourth question inquired whether clinical linguistics was similar to speech therapy. In response to this question, the majority of the participants disagreed. The graph (*see graph 1*) shows only five of them associated clinical linguistics with speech therapy, whereas eleven did not support this. To put elaborately, five of the participants strongly replied ‘no’ and the other six were confused on this point.

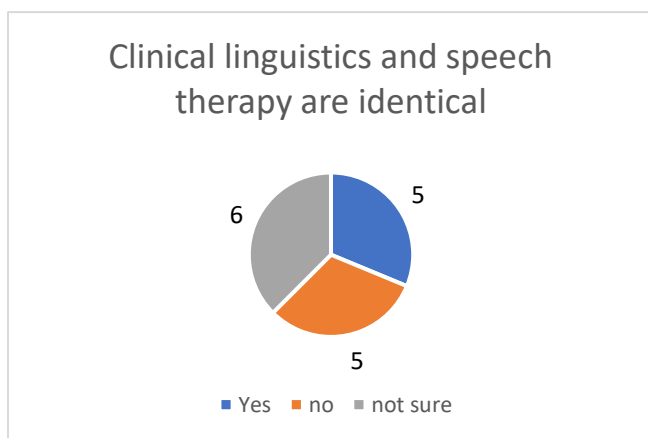


Figure 1: Participants' response to associate clinical linguistics and speech therapy

The participants were quite right in their standpoint. The knowledge and skill of a full course are not sufficient enough to be identified as a speech therapist unless they attend a vast range of courses that makes them to the maximum extent skillful. Thus, in the fifth question, the participants rightly supported establishing clinical linguistics as an independent academic discipline. For example, graph 2 helps visualise the majority of the participants (75%) was in favour of developing clinical linguistics as a separate department. They also hoped that the new department would produce skilled graduates or genuine speech and language therapists to properly serve the nation in the context of communication health of the masses.

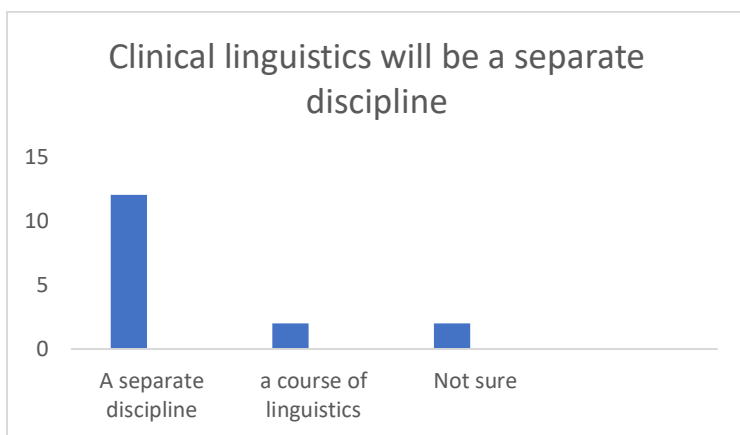


Figure 2: Participants' views on establishing a new department of clinical linguistics

To answer question number six on the aspect of suitable working places for the graduates of Clinical Linguistics, the participants mentioned various professional fields. For instance, all of them mentioned 'hospital' and 'clinic' as the two most potential work-stations for a speech therapist, whereas 50% of them added the

name ‘special school’. Graph 3 also shows only three of the total participants mentioned ‘school’ as another working place for the graduates of clinical linguistics. To the participants, the *special school* indicated a type of academic institution, which was set up exclusively for special children with autism, Down syndrome, intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy, whereas *school* meant all mainstream academic schools. These three participants can be credited as advanced learners because they informed the author that they learned from different websites that a true speech therapist who graduated from the department of either Communication Disorders or Clinical Linguistics is nowadays recruited in the primary or secondary school in many developed countries.

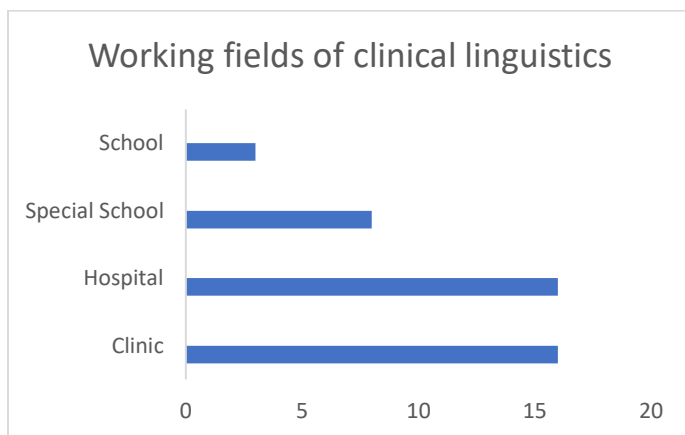


Figure 3: Possible working places for the graduates of clinical linguistics

In response to the last question, all participants confirmed that clinical linguistics might be continued as an advanced course of linguistics, though they recommended establishing of a separate department. As they further asserted, it would be useful to study

more courses describing various applied fields of theoretical linguistics, especially clinical linguistics. This is because, attending this course they would acquire knowledge of how theories and methods of phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are applied to explain a burning issue of the society, especially speech and language disorders.

5. Discussion

This study can be regarded as a post-hoc needs analysis that explains the issue of establishing a separate department titled ‘Communication Disorders’, a broader American term for clinical linguistics, at the Dhaka University, to study the details of clinical linguistics with rigorous academic flavour while maintaining practical environment and facilities. Higher educational institutions in Bangladesh are known to establish new department without conducting any prior needs analysis. An identical strategy was followed during the development of communication disorders. In this regard, this study can also be considered a justification for establishing this department, though it is done in a post-hoc manner almost after six years of its first official working day.

Like any other linguistic community throughout the world, ours is also a speech as well as language disorder sensitive society. A significant number of children, approximately 10%, are born with various neurodevelopmental disorders. Due to this reason, they continuously suffer from speech, language, and communication disorders. These children have problems with different kinds of expressive and receptive language disorders namely Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Down syndrome, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Specific Language Impairment (SLI) and so on.

Besides, a big portion of adult people develop acquired language disorders like Aphasia, Apraxia, Dysarthria, Stuttering etc. as a consequence of having a stroke, tumour, and trauma. As a result, children with different communication disorders fail to express themselves and hence lack proper education and they always remain out of the mainstream. They fail to maintain a spontaneous daily communication context, school life and personal life as well. Accordingly, when adult working people become speechless due to developing communication problems, they are neglected and treated as the burden of society. They cannot cope with the regularity of their working and personal life due to their speech and language deficiencies. Both children and adults with different speech-language difficulties suffer in every sphere of life. All language disorders restrict an individual's ability to communicate freely with others in a range of contexts and settings. Thus, it is crystal clear that our language disabilities may lead our life to a severe problematic dimension.

However, unfortunately, our medical professionals do not pay much attention to these two chronic problems. Therefore, studying clinical linguistics is a necessity in Bangladesh. Alongside, as pointed out before, there was a growing demand among the students to establish a new associated department named Communication Disorders as an extension of the study of this applied field of Linguistics. This aspect is reflected in the result section of this study. More specifically, the result of question number five attests to the validity of establishing a separate department to study the topics of clinical linguistics in a wide range and elaborated manner. Concerning this, in the questionnaire, the participants also added that our society needs graduates of clinical linguistics to serve the nation by combating speech and language disorders.

The answer to the last question fully supports Raskin's (1986) statement. Like the graduates of theoretical linguistics in the USA, the students who completed a master's degree in Linguistics in Bangladesh also feel much discomfort when they fail to relate their knowledge and skill in the job market. Therefore, the participants genuinely recommended continuing clinical linguistics in the curriculum of linguistics in addition to developing a new department on the aspects of this field. After all, the more the students will study applied courses that match to the maximum extent with the needs of society, the more they will be privileged in the job market. Hence, the employers will also add more value to the graduates and the department as well. As the world is getting faster, to cope with this developed world our country is also taking initiatives regarding making people conscious of speech-language problems. There was hardly any discussion on this a few years back because of lack of awareness. Now it is drawing the attention of the mass people who are suffering from these communication disorders. So, this field needs skilled professionals to deal with the growing demands. The skilled professionals can serve the people with communication disorders by involving themselves in the hospitals, clinics, specialised schools, therapy centres, and private chambers. Considering all these aspects, PISER (Proyash Institute of Special Education and Research), an institute of Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Dhaka has already started an undergraduate programme in Audiology and Speech Language Pathology instead of general linguistics exclusively to fulfil the demand of the job market immediately after establishing the Department of Communication Disorders, University of Dhaka.

Finally, this study also reflects that the process of introducing clinical linguistics as a course in the Department of Linguistics

and establishing a new department genuinely developed from the same origin and moved in the identical direction. In this context, it is not an exaggeration that the discipline 'Communication Disorders' is nothing but an American extension of clinical linguistics.

The researcher is optimistic that the findings of this research will have the potential to contribute to this field, specifically in addressing problems concerning language and communication. Given that, the future learners of this concerned field will be enlightened by this research work. This will pave way for the learners to recognise the critical importance of this field, and thus society will ultimately benefit from this.

6. Conclusion

Clinical linguistics is exclusively a need-based course under the domain of linguistics. At the same time, it has enormous potential to be studied as an independent academic discipline either in the name of *Communication Disorders* or *Speech-language Therapy/Pathology* since the topics of this discipline try to unfold acute socio-cultural problems of persons living in a given linguistic community. Bangladesh Government is taking so many initiatives nowadays to make people aware of language disorders like- autism, Down-syndrome, aphasia and so on. People in our society are suffering from different language and communication problems but there are very few places to consult about it. Therefore, more universities in Bangladesh should take immediate initiatives to introduce Clinical Linguistics either as a full course under linguistics or any language-based department like Bengali or English to make their students familiar with the ongoing problems of society or even set up a full-fledged academic department to produce skilled graduates in the job market. By

establishing an independent academic sector, we should create a scope for studying and researching more about different speech-language-communication difficulties and get new theories and/or treatment approaches, which will help the people with communication disorders in our society. In addition, we can get more skilled professionals in this field who will be able to make a huge change in the field of communication health of mass people.

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Annex 1

Questionnaire

Name:

Year & Roll:

1. Do you know the term ‘Clinical Linguistics’? How?
2. How do you associate clinical linguistics with linguistics?
3. What are the topics of clinical linguistics?
4. Do you think clinical linguistics and speech-language therapy/pathology are synonymous?
5. Is it possible to study clinical linguistics as an independent discipline in Bangladesh? Why?
6. How can the graduates of clinical linguistics contribute to the job sector of Bangladesh?
7. Do you think that the clinical linguistics course should be continued in your department? Why?