



Confronting Professional and Cultural Barriers to Evidence-Based Teaching in University English Departments: An Auto-Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Evidence-based teaching practices (EBTP) are essential for 21st-century education, yet their integration into higher education remains underexplored, with most studies focusing on schools. This study aims to identify cultural and professional barriers hindering EBTP adoption among university lecturers through an auto-ethnographic approach. Using Flanagan's Critical Incident Technique (CIT) and personal journaling, longitudinal qualitative data were collected and analyzed within an interpretive framework. The findings revealed that deeply ingrained cultural capital and traditional professional practices significantly obstructed the adoption of EBTP, highlighting resistance to pedagogical innovation, peer learning, and student-centred teaching. These barriers emphasize the need for institutional reforms, professional development initiatives, and a cultural shift to foster evidence-based practices in higher education, contributing to bridging the gap between research and practice in pedagogy.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of quality education is to ensure that students' skill development leads to positive outcomes in their lives (Rajaram, 2021). However, many challenges hinder the delivery of quality learning, including the fact that not all learners are identical in every aspect (Hempenstall, 2006). In response, educational reforms and innovations, such as blended learning and integrating HOTS-oriented worksheets, are periodically recommended to address these challenges (Nurulsari et al., 2023). As a result, evidence-based practice (EBP) or evidence-informed practice (EIP) has emerged in various professions, including teaching. The term "evidence" in this context refers specifically to research evidence.

EBP first gained recognition in the medical field in the 1990s (Reynolds, 2008) and was later adopted in other areas such as social work, human services policies, and faith-based services (Despard, 2016; James et al., 2019; O'Hare, 2020; Terry et al., 2015). Following this trend, EBP was also advocated in education, with early adoption in countries like Australia, the USA, and the UK (Reynolds, 2008). However, implementing evidence-based teaching practices (EBTP) has proven challenging due to the gap between educational research and teaching practice (Reynolds, 2008). Barriers such as reluctance

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to change and lack of support challenges also noted in non-teaching professions-complicate the adoption of EBTP (Brown et al., 2009; Newman et al., 1998; Yahui & Swaminathan, 2017).

Despite these challenges, EBP has been widely adopted in higher education, particularly in medical education, healthcare, and nursing, where educators' attitudes, skills, and knowledge facilitate its implementation (Nielsen et al., 2024). Nevertheless, time constraints remain a significant barrier (Evans et al., 2023; Nielsen et al., 2024). For instance, (Nielsen et al., 2024) empirically demonstrated that while positive attitudes, high skill levels, and knowledge among educators are key facilitators for EBTP implementation, the lack of time is a prominent impediment. While these barriers and facilitators offer valuable insights, they often lack the first-hand, ethnographically situated experiences this study seeks to explore.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in producing capable human resources in a developing country like Bangladesh. Private universities, which number 107 compared to 50 public universities, are key players in providing higher education. However, concerns about the quality of teaching, learning, and management in these private institutions have been raised, highlighting issues such as neoliberalism, marketization, and massification (Ahmed, 2016). These concerns underscore the urgency of addressing the 'question of standard' in private universities (Chowdhury, 2007).

Students in Bangladesh expect private universities to deliver quality education by recruiting qualified teachers with deep subject knowledge, effective teaching techniques, and strong skills in assessment, rapport-building, and pedagogical preparation (Akareem & Hossain, 2012). To fulfil these expectations, Bangladesh's University Grants Commission (UGC) has called on all private universities to consistently implement world-class teaching methods, outcome-based education, and stringent assessment standards (Mazumder, 2014). The UGC has also mandated the establishment of Instructional Quality Assurance Cells in these institutions to ensure the continuous improvement of teaching and learning (Rahnuma, 2020). In this context, the use of evidence-based teaching practices (EBTP) is regarded as a key strategy for improving educational quality, especially by incorporating innovative methods such as TPACK in teacher training programs (Kurniawati et al., 2023) and systematic approaches to overcoming online learning challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Suherman et al., 2021).

This auto-ethnography is set in the English department of a private university in Bangladesh, where the first author, a lecturer in TESOL and literature, aimed to shift from a traditional teacher-centred pedagogy to a learner-centred approach grounded in empirical research. The department's faculty, with diverse academic backgrounds, presented opportunities and challenges for this paradigm shift. Despite the university's focus on teaching over research, it encourages innovation, making it a suitable context for implementing EBTP. Identifying and overcoming barriers to EBTP is crucial for ensuring quality education (Barnes & Forde, 2021). University educators in Bangladesh, as in other parts of the world, are central to creating new knowledge and implementing EBTP. However, challenges such as a lack of support from educational leaders and a pervasive "science-averse culture" present significant obstacles. Addressing these cultural and professional barriers is essential for successfully adopting EBTP in higher education (Nilsen et al., 2017).

While much of the existing research on EBTP has focused on medical and nursing education, there is a notable gap in its application within the Arts and Humanities, particularly in English departments in the global South. To ensure effective learning in higher education, it is necessary to reconsider, reconfigure, and promote new teaching approaches (Hativa, 2000; Henderson et al., 2012; Mladenovici et al., 2022). This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the ethnographic challenges that may hinder the adoption of EBTP in the cultural and professional practices of an English department in Bangladesh. This study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What ethnographic evidence exists of cultural barriers to implementing EBTP in higher education? (2) What ethnographic evidence exists of professional barriers to implementing EBTP in higher education? (3) What are the implications of these barriers for implementing EBTP in higher education?

METHOD

Reflective Auto-ethnography as a Qualitative Research Method

This study uses auto-ethnography to explore the cultural and professional barriers to evidence-based teaching practice (EBTP) in the first author's department. Auto-ethnography involves reflecting on lived experiences to gain insights into cultural phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). The qualitative approach is grounded in the belief that every culture and professional setting is unique, necessitating a constructivist paradigm (Asmawi & Alam, 2024). This study adopts a qualitative method to explore the localized realities based on teachers' experiences without coupling them with quantitative intentions.

Some Evidences of Education for Practice

The study aimed to implement evidence-based teaching in higher education, guided by the 'scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) principles.' The evidence-based guide and the EBP model (Walker et al., 2014) were followed. Effective practices were implemented based on established educational research, demonstrating their success in improving student outcomes (Dunn et al., 2013). Key principles included rapport-building, student-centred learning, assessment rubrics, double marking, peer learning, and integrating content and skill teaching.

EBP Decision-Making Model and Operational Process

An evidence-based practice (EBP) model was developed to translate research into practice, following a five-step framework (Duff et al., 2020). By the established framework, the identification of learners' needs through a comprehensive questionnaire may be conducted during the 'ask' phase. This is followed by the 'acquire' phase, where relevant research evidence is sought. Given that not all research is reliable (Schechter et al., 1991), the 'appraise' phase involves critical appraisal of the evidence, focusing on questions of validity and generalizability (Walker et al., 2014). After appraising the evidence, decisions for EBP are made, followed by an evaluation of their impact on professional practices. These steps do not always occur simultaneously and may be affected by various barriers. The study focuses on identifying barriers to EBTP within this framework.

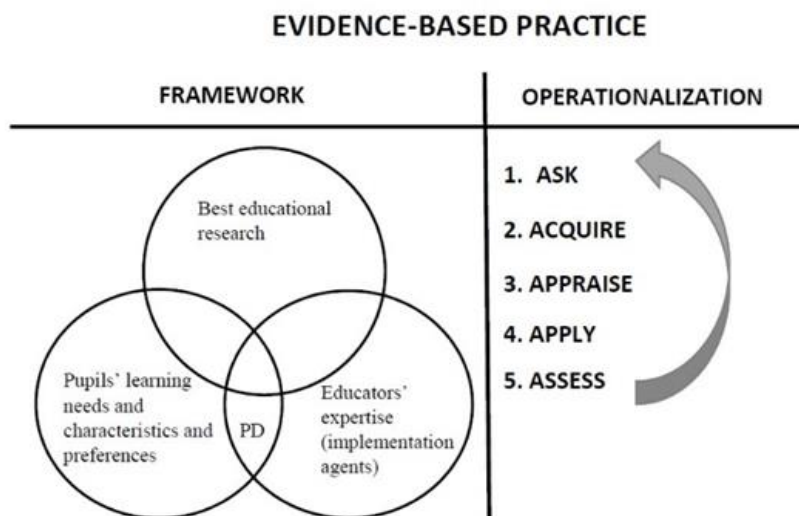


Figure 1. EBP Framework and Five-Step-Operational Processes (Walker et al., 2014)

The Auto-Ethnographer and Their Fellowship Size

The study is auto-ethnographic, focusing on the implementation challenges of EBTP in the English Department of a Bangladesh private university. The ethnographer, the first author, interacts with eight colleagues, forming the sample size for this qualitative study. The small fellowship size is contextually and ethnographically fixed, aligning with the study's philosophical underpinning.

Data Collection

The first author also serves as the research participant, with data from personal experiences during a one-and-a-half-year EBTP implementation period. Using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), the author kept a reflective journal of both positive and negative critical incidents. The journal was maintained according to [Annink's \(2017\)](#) guidelines, ensuring originality and accuracy. Negative critical incidents relevant to the study were selected and collaboratively reviewed.

Data Analysis

Data were organized using a longitudinal qualitative summary approach and analyzed through an interpretive paradigm, recognizing the subjective meanings of events. A four-stage analytical framework adapted from ([Hall & Townsend, 2017](#)) was used, focusing on the incidents' context, details, thoughts, feelings, concerns, and demands. Major themes representing barriers to EBTP emerged from this analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of faculty-posed cultural and professional barriers to Evidence-Based Teaching Practices (EBTP) in university teaching. The authors used auto-ethnography to posit the findings of a self-study conducted in a cultural and professional setting where they experienced the phenomenon in different roles ([Asmawi & Alam, 2024; Ellis et al., 2011](#)). The study aimed to identify factors that hinder the implementation of EBTP in the first author's department through critical incidents. One incident, labelled CI-1, was related to a new faculty member's behaviour, identified as Faculty A. The incident occurred during the first author's CPD sessions on the basics of EBTP for the newly appointed faculty cohort in their ELL department.

Faculty A appeared rude and authoritative during the first class, and some students had difficulty understanding the lesson topic. After the class, the first author received complaints about the teacher's behaviour, and some students expressed disappointment over A's teaching and assignment system. He conversed with the faculty member privately and advised some evidence-based practices for classroom management, student-centred teaching, and rapport building. Still, Faculty A did not change her teaching style. The incident raised concerns about the teacher-student reciprocal exchanges, students' learning, and teachers' failure in that course, with a threat of students boycotting the teacher. He felt a need for a change in Faculty A's mindset about classroom management, student-centered teaching, and acquisition of pedagogical knowledge. This aligns with the observation that cultural capital, as described by ([Bourdieu, 2018](#)), can significantly influence faculty behaviour and attitudes toward new pedagogical approaches.

The critical incident (CI-2) highlights the cultural and professional barriers to evidence-based teaching practices (EBTP) among faculty members. The incident involves faculty B, who has two Master's degrees in English and was struggling in teaching. The first author provided CPDs and a book on learning, teaching, and teacher education to help B improve her teaching skills. However, B expressed negative feelings towards the researcher's methods and rejected the idea of collegial learning, stating, "I have two Master's in English. Do I have to learn teaching from him?" The first author was concerned about this incident and felt an urgent need for a more collaborative learning environment and participation among faculty members to overcome this barrier to EBTP implementation.

CI-3 took place during a conversation in the faculty workstation when faculty member C expressed her dissatisfaction with the advocacy for Evidence-Based Teaching Practices (EBTP) by some members of the ELL department, including the first author. She accused them of "spoon-feeding the students" and rejected the student-centred approach. The first author retrospectively understood that C was uninterested in EBTP and bored with their advocacy. He felt disappointed at C's disbelief in research evidence and the unconsciousness of 21st-century teaching. He also discovered a practice of professional jealousy in faculty member D, who was misguiding new faculty against the speaker to prevent the first author from succeeding as a department leader. This situation highlights the impact of identity politics in educational settings, as described by ([Barr & Tagg, 1995](#)). The speaker felt concerned

about discouragement from D and demanded more time, counselling, and continuing professional development (CPD) so that C could change her teaching philosophy and pedagogy.

During an incident where some students expressed their concerns over alleged unfair marking and grade distribution, the first author proposed using an assessment rubric in his ELL department's assessment practice, and a critical incident occurred. However, faculty members A, C, D, and F rejected the idea, with D even asking, "Is there any extra payment for this, sir?" He felt embarrassed by the monetary aspect of the situation. He wondered whether the opposition was due to a desire for an easy comfort zone or a lack of concern for the weaknesses of traditional assessment practices. This concern about monetary compensation underscores the broader challenges of implementing new practices in marketized higher education environments, as discussed (Ahmed, 2016). He also suspected that professional conflicts and jealousy played a role in the opposition. He believed that the university administration needed to address D's question about whether a new assessment system would lead to additional payments or salary increases.

Further critical incidents occurred during an academic meeting to discuss the development of the assessment. There were complaints from students about inconsistencies in grading and marking on their exam scripts. The first author proposed a solution of double marking the scripts by two faculties to ensure transparency and fairness but was met with opposition from colleagues who cited a lack of time to carry out the practice. The colleagues collectively stated, "The idea is good, but we don't have time to practice it." The proposed practice was ultimately not implemented (Brown et al., 2009). The author felt unhappy about students' dissatisfaction with the department's assessment practice and was concerned about the faculty's time constraints. As a result, the first demanded that the faculty's workload be assessed and managed effectively.

During an academic discussion on integrating skill focus into content teaching, another critical incident took place as three lecturers, A, B, and E, opposed the idea. The first author was implementing Evidence-Based Teaching Practice (EBTP) in their department, which involved integrating skills and content in teaching. The students benefitted from this approach and suggested that other lecturers adopt it. However, the opposing lecturers strongly advised against listening to students' complaints and suggestions, as it would "empower them". This resistance to change reflects the broader cultural and professional barriers to innovation in higher education, particularly in marketized and massified systems, as described by (Ahmed, 2016) and (Akareem & Hossain, 2012). Despite the benefits of the integrated approach, the traditional content teaching method was continued. The first author felt disappointed and concerned about the students' skill learning and demanded a mindset transformation and teaching reform among the faculty.

Contextual factors are critical in determining the barriers and facilitators to implementing evidence-based practice (EBP). A literature review by (Schaik et al., 2018) has identified some success conditions that, if not met, can act as barriers. (Salbach et al., 2007) Further, the barriers to EBP are categorized into three levels: individual teacher-level barriers, team-level barriers, and organization-level barriers. This study focuses on faculty-level factors and classifies them as cultural and professional, integrating concepts of cultural capital and social capital as defined by (Bourdieu, 2018).

Cultural and Professional Barriers to EBTP

Cultural factors are particularly significant, as they refer to the culturally accumulated individual or collective resources, or "cultural capital," which include beliefs, attitudes, qualifications, education, and other institutionalized resources that shape professional behaviours and decisions. These cultural resources can either facilitate or hinder the adoption of Evidence-Based Teaching Practices (EBTP). For example, teachers' resistance to new pedagogical practices often stems from their deeply ingrained cultural identities as educators, which align with traditional teacher-centred pedagogies.

However, cultural factors alone do not fully explain the barriers to EBTP. Professional factors, understood as "social capital," play an equally critical role in influencing the success or failure of EBP implementation. As (Soto, 2020) pointed out, peer learning or collegial learning among teachers is an essential factor in encouraging the adoption of EBP. A lack of support from colleagues can create an

environment where EBP is absent, reinforcing conservative teaching practices that resist change (Culyer et al., 2018). When teachers engage in professional learning with a shared focus on student learning, it can facilitate the implementation of EBP (King, 2014).

Faculty's Opinionated, Old-Modeled Teaching

Based on observations of consistent behavioural and philosophical patterns, it can be inferred that faculty members' reluctance to adopt EBTP is partly rooted in their experiences as learners, influenced by traditional teacher-centred pedagogy. Many faculty members idealize a teacher-self that aligns with their culture's characteristics of traditional teacher models, reflecting a deep-seated mindset resistant to generational change. This mindset has created conservative teachers who rely on anecdotal practices and maintain an opinionated teacher-self, making them unavailable for new or alternative teaching methods that may be more effective, reliable, and research-based. These faculty members referred to as "indifferent teachers" (Cranney, 2013), are not receptive to EBTP despite evidence of its efficacy.

The resistance seen in faculty members such as A and C aligns with findings from (Hashemiparast et al., 2019), who suggest that fear of the consequences of adopting new practices, such as perceived loss of control or failure in a "trial and error" approach, can hinder the implementation of EBTP. Moreover, the influence of background education and professional experiences contributes to this reluctance. Faculty members without an educational background, such as those with literature or arts degrees, may perceive EBP as unnecessary or incompatible with their discipline, as observed (Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2014). Conversely, those with degrees in education or ELT tend to be more open to pedagogical innovation and empirical research.

Background Prototypicality and Egocentricity

The findings suggest that faculty members' professional identities, shaped by their educational backgrounds, play a significant role in their receptiveness to EBTP. Those with non-education degrees often exhibit resistance due to a sense of prototypicality and egocentricity. For instance, despite having multiple degrees in literature, colleague G demonstrated an openness to new teaching practices. At the same time, A and C maintained an egocentric attachment to their degrees as indicators of teaching mastery, hindering their willingness to learn from empirical research or their peers (Torres et al., 2012).

Professional Jealousy and Subgrouping

Professional factors, such as jealousy and subgrouping, further complicate the implementation of EBTP. Faculty members D and A, who resisted EBTP despite their background in ELT, displayed professional jealousy, which hindered collaboration and fostered an unhealthy competition environment within the department. This subgrouping not only impedes peer learning but also stifles professional growth and innovation, as observed by (Franklin, 2007; Soto, 2020). Collegial learning, as (King, 2014) noted, is crucial for facilitating the adoption of EBTP, but the lack of collaboration in this setting poses a significant barrier.

Identity Politics

The resistance to EBTP also extends to identity politics, where faculty members cling to their role as the authoritative figure in a teacher-centered classroom. This resistance is not merely about pedagogical preferences but is deeply tied to their cultural and professional identities as "knowledge authorities" (Barr & Tagg, 1995). The shift to a student-centred learning approach, a hallmark of EBTP, threatens this traditional power dynamic, leading to further opposition, as seen in colleagues A and D.

Lack of Extrinsic Motivation

The issue of extrinsic motivation further compounds these challenges. As (Fitzgerald et al., 2017) argued, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation plays a pivotal role in teachers' willingness to adopt new practices. In this case, the lack of extrinsic motivation, such as adequate remuneration, creates a significant barrier to EBTP. Faculty members, already dissatisfied with their salaries, may view tasks like

developing assessment rubrics or conducting peer reviews as additional burdens that are not commensurately rewarded. This lack of motivation prevents faculty from investing the necessary effort to adopt EBTP, reinforcing a status quo where traditional practices prevail.

Workload and Time Constraints

Lastly, workload and time constraints represent a pervasive challenge in implementing EBTP. Faculty members cited their heavy teaching loads and resulting professional burnout as reasons for their reluctance to engage with EBTP. This aligns with previous findings that highlight time constraints as a common barrier to educational innovation (Brown et al., 2009; Yahui & Swaminathan, 2017). The perception that EBTP, such as double marking or integrating skills into content teaching, requires additional time and effort discourages faculty from adopting these practices.

Challenges in Translating Research into Practice

Another significant barrier is the difficulty teachers face in translating research into practice. Many teachers struggle to comprehend the significance of research findings and how to apply them effectively in their classrooms (Spencer et al., 2012). This challenge is exacerbated by a lack of mastery in content knowledge (CK) and pedagogical knowledge (PK), which are critical for the successful adoption of EBTP. Furthermore, limited communication with researchers and inadequate knowledge of research methodologies can hinder teachers' ability to integrate evidence-based practices into their teaching (Meeks et al., 2020). This issue is particularly pressing given the demanding nature of teaching, where limited time to engage with research can further impede the implementation of EBTP (Schaik et al., 2018).

In sum, the barriers to EBTP in this department are a complex interplay of cultural and professional factors. Cultural capital, rooted in traditional educational models, and professional obstacles, such as peer resistance, lack of motivation, and challenges in applying research, combine to create a resistant environment. For EBTP to be successfully implemented, these barriers must be addressed through policy changes, professional development, and a shift in the cultural and professional attitudes of the faculty.

This research recommends using mixed methods that combine qualitative insights and quantitative data to increase the generalizability of findings. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of lecturers' cultural and professional barriers in implementing Evidence-Based Teaching Practices (EBTP) while providing significant statistical evidence to support the findings. Thus, the research results are relevant to the local context and have broader validity to be applied across other disciplines and higher education institutions.

The scope of the research needs to be expanded by involving lecturers from different disciplinary backgrounds and institutions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced. This cross-disciplinary research will enrich perspectives and offer more inclusive solutions, such as professional development strategies specifically designed to meet the unique needs of each field. By integrating these two approaches, research can significantly improve the quality of evidence-based teaching in higher education.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several weaknesses, including a relatively small sample size involving only eight colleagues and the use of an autoethnographic approach, which limits the generalizability of the findings to a wider academic context. The focus of the study on one private university in Bangladesh, specifically English department lecturers, also narrows the relevance of the results for application to other disciplines or institutions. The absence of quantitative data is another limitation that makes this study less able to present significant statistical evidence to support its findings.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies key barriers to implementing evidence-based teaching practices (EBTP) among higher education faculty rooted in culturally ingrained pedagogical customs, beliefs, and professional practices. Specific deterrents include adherence to traditional teaching models, egocentricity, identity politics, professional jealousy, subgrouping, lack of extrinsic motivation, and time constraints. To address these challenges, the study recommends strategies such as providing adequate preparation time for new lecturers, offering continuous professional development, conducting targeted workshops, fostering peer learning, promoting collaboration, and adjusting teaching loads. By overcoming these barriers, institutions can better facilitate the adoption of EBTP, with implications that extend to similar educational contexts.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MSA led the overall research process, including the design, execution, data collection, qualitative data analysis, and manuscript drafting. AA contributed to developing visual representations, assisted in the data collection process, and significantly refined the study design. MHH was involved in interpreting the qualitative findings and reviewing and revising the manuscript to ensure intellectual rigor and depth.

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