

# Mobile phone English lessons a hit in Bangladesh

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In this picture taken on December 9, Bangladeshi pedestrians speak on their cellular telephones as they walk through a commercial district in Dhaka. Hundreds of thousands of young men have "swamped" the mobile English teaching service since it was launched last month by a charity arm of the BBC.

Every morning, Ahmed Shariar Sarwar makes it his daily ritual to call number 3000 on his mobile phone to get lessons in English -- his passport to a better life in impoverished Bangladesh.

The mobile tutorial lasts only three minutes, but Rahman, 21, who is studying the textile trade says it is already helping him learn the language, which is key to getting a lucrative job in foreign firms based in Dhaka.

He is among hundreds of thousands of young men who have turned to

the novel English teaching service since it was launched last month by a charity arm of the BBC.

The aim is to teach the language to six million people by 2011.

"It's simple and good. It costs three taka (four US cents) per lesson -- the cheapest way to learn English in Bangladesh," Rahman said. "There are a lot of English courses available here, but most rip you off and the quality isn't so good."

It is also easily accessible via all six of Bangladesh's [mobile phone](#) operators whose networks cover almost the entire population.

Called Janala (window), the teaching programme allows students to take a lesson in conversation, pronunciation and basic English and involves them dialing in five days a week for 18 months.

It is already being hailed as a hit.

"We are simply overwhelmed," said Sara Chamberlain, head of the programme at the BBC World Service Trust, an international development agency which uses the media to reduce poverty, promote human rights and improve lives.

"We had expected no more than 25,000 calls on the first day... but we were swamped with 84,000 and it's growing," she said.

Chamberlain said in the six days after the launch, 400,000 people phoned in for lessons.

"It shows how hungry the young people are here to learn English," she said.

A recent nationwide survey carried out on low-income people by the charity showed that some 80 percent were willing to pay for English lessons on their mobile phones.

Bangladesh's export-oriented textile sector, as well as smaller service industries such as banking, require English-speaking employees whose basic pay can reach up to 500 dollars a month -- in a country where the minimum wage is only 25 dollars.

Top education expert professor Iqbal Aziz Muttaki of Dhaka University said although the new teaching programme is limited in its scope, it offers some hope to the country's millions of poor students.

"Our education system has failed miserably to teach English to the poor and middle income people. The rich can bypass the system by sending their kids to high-cost English schools, but others simply don't have any hopes," he said.

He blamed the country's "short-sighted" leaders since its independence in 1971 for the poor state of English, which he said is "holding back the country's growth".

Some 99 percent Bangladeshis speak Bengali as their mother tongue and a 1952 movement to establish it as an official state language of the then Pakistan culminated in the country's independence from the Islamic republic.

"Bangladeshis are proud of their language. All governments have promoted Bengali in every sphere of learning, in the process they almost wiped out English from our education system," said Muttaki

"Even some varsity professors here don't have basic knowledge in English," he added.

Chamberlain said they have designed the lessons for mobile phones in such a way that a new learner does not find them too challenging.

The easiest series "Essential English" consists of 78 consecutive lessons -- one recorded module is run a day -- and it teaches learners how to talk to someone.

The "Pronunciation" series tackles hearing problems while a more challenging "How to tell a story" teaches common grammatical constructions and vocabulary via a series of 56 lessons.

The Janala tutorials can also be found on a website for students who can log on to their computers from home or at schools. A total of 6,000 signed up in this way in six days in a country with very limited Internet access.

BBC trust officials said the success of the programme was largely due to the fact all of the country's mobile operators had got on board and given up to 75-percent discounts on calls to the dedicated Janala number.

Although nearly 40 percent of Bangladesh's 144 million people live below the poverty line, mobile phones have penetrated deep into rural areas.

Fifty one million people now use them thanks to some of the cheapest call rates in the world. The number is expected to double by 2015.

Rahman, who comes from a village in northern Bangladesh is hopeful he can make up for the failings of the [education system](#) through private coaching and services like Janala.

"I've realised late how important English language is. It's the only thing that can guarantee a good job. That's why lessons like Janala are so

essential for people like us," he said.

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