

Title: Back to School

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Sajjad Shaheb looks at his watch **anxiously**. The class is about to start. It is just fifteen minutes before six o'clock in the evening. He started from his office, which is **located** in *Savar*, at four thirty in the **afternoon**, almost half an hour before his work day usually ends. For the last three days he has received special permission from his *boss** to leave early, as he has to **attend** a class.

Yes, *Sajjad Shaheb* has **finally** been admitted to a private university to study again after many years. He feels *shy** about telling this to others openly, as it is **a bit** unusual to go back to studies when you are in your late forties. When people hear that, they give him a strange look. "What are you doing at university at your age?" they ask, raising their *eyebrows**. This is the most common expression of surprise he receives when he shares this **information**. For this reason, he feels **uncomfortable** about telling people, even his relatives.

He also fears that he will not be able to complete his studies successfully, but since he has nothing else outside his work to do but his studies, he has come to a point of no return. In fact, he has no choice. He has to complete his *Bachelor of Engineering** degree because the *diploma** in Engineering that he had already completed is not enough to help him get a **promotion** in his work place. He already knows a lot in his own field, as experience has taught him **a lot** about his work. Many a time, *Sajjad Shaheb* finds that he can give very good advice to his **immediate** bosses who are actually younger than him in age, but have a higher position, because they already have a B.Sc engineering degree 'in their **bag**'. Though he is **skilled** at his **job**, he does not have a degree, and this makes him feel *inferior**. These younger people are *junior** to him in age, but they are in a higher position, which makes him feel **dissatisfied**. It was this situation that **pushed** him to apply to a private university, and to his great pleasure, he was admitted.

It's a university where there are opportunities for **adults** who have had a long **gap** in their studies to return to university and get their bachelor degrees. But he is finding that attending classes three days a week is really difficult. He was able to ask his boss if he could leave the office early, but at the same time he has to do this secretly, without his **colleagues** knowing. Otherwise, he is **afraid** that they may laugh at him and say *unkind** things.



Class of adult learners. Photo by C. Brown.

When he enters the class after working at his office for the whole day, naturally he is **tired**. It is not easy to enter Dhaka city from a nearby city on a working day to attend class, the **traffic** is so heavy, and moving across the city is difficult. He always **worries** about being late, but he does not have any other **option**. Without this degree, he will not get a promotion, and without a promotion his **salary** will not increase. He badly needs the **extra** money to support his family. His **parents** are getting old, and they need **medicine**. They also need to visit the doctor **regularly**. *Sajjad Shaheb's* daughter is growing up and she will be leaving middle school this year. His sister *Shorna* is going to get married next year, and some extra money is needed to cover the expense for that marriage. *Sajjad Shaheb* badly needs a higher salary. For that, he badly needs a promotion, and in turn, he badly needs to complete his degree. He has no other choice but to take the classes.

As he enters the *classroom** at last, this thought gives him the extra **energy** he needs to forget his *tiredness**. The **charming** English teacher is teaching from the **grammar** book in her hand. She is very **smart**, and she is also a lovely lady. She understands his situation, and gives him a smile. She doesn't mind his being a little late for class as she knows that her adult students are also working at jobs in other places and that they have to travel across the city to attend class. She knows the reality of traffic *jams** in Dhaka city, so she **ignores** the late arrival of her older students, something which she usually does not do for her **regular** classes of younger students.



Busy Dhaka Traffic by C. Brown.

The teacher is friendly and understanding of her adult students, but still *Sajjad shaheb* finds it difficult to learn a foreign language at his age. It is not that he has not learned English before, but after a long gap in English language learning, it is a bit difficult for him to start learning again. The other classes in his engineering course are not so difficult for him to **adjust** to as he has been working in the field for a long time, but he is very **aware** of his “poor ” English. Oh! Yes! Of course the teacher tries her best to make it easy for them, but what are these strange words, and these strange things she is talking about? *Oreo cookies*, *spaghetti*, *lasagna*, *General Motors*, *Porche* cars, *strawberries* and *blueberries*, and what is this strange thing called a “*blind date*”? He has never heard of these things before in his whole life! It would be easier for him to learn English in his tired mind if those “English” names were in *Bengali*, or if the **lesson** described things that he already knew about, *Shajjad Shaheeb* wishes secretly. He would **definitely** find it easier if the words were *Glucose* Biscuits, *Pittha*, Toyota car, *jolpai* , *Kalo Jaam*, or even *Kamranga*!



Kamranga (Star Fruit) and *Jolpai* (Olives) by K. Ridwana



Pittha, by K. Ridwana

Sajjed Shaheeb came to know from his other *senior classmates** that the next course, which is an English speaking course, is even more difficult than this grammar course. In the class he is taking right now, you just have to learn and write grammar in the *exam script** and you can pass the exam easily, but the next class is really **terrible**, because the students have to speak in a foreign language in front of the whole class. Actually, he never had to speak in English in public in his **entire** student life before now, so he is beginning to feel really worried. What will happen if he speaks in his “*Bangladeshi*” *accent**? Will his classmates judge him as being less smart than they are? Speaking in **fluent** English is a **symbol** of *smartness** in society. How on earth will he pass that course? *Sajjad Shaheeb* worries about the future, but whatever it is, he has to pass the exam. He has to succeed. So many people are **relying** on him.

The teacher **reminds** the students that **tomorrow** is the **submission** day for the **final assignment** of the *semester** and they must not be late. *Sajjad Shaheeb* is full of **excitement** and **energy**. He knows that if he

submits a very good assignment, he will surely be able to get a good **grade**. He did not take his assignments seriously when he was a younger student, but now, as a **mature** student, he is very serious about his studies and understands the importance of getting good grades.

After class, *Sajjad Shaheb* starts for home. He is tired and **hungry** after his long day. It is already nine thirty at night and there is still a lot of traffic on the road. He is thinking of the assignment that he has to do after returning home.



Dhaka night traffic, by C. Brown

He needs to work on the **computer** and complete his assignment. When he is near his house, he **suddenly** remembers that his wife told him to bring his father's medicine from the city *pharmacy**. He also remembers that his mother told him that their supply of **rice** is almost all gone and he has to bring home some *chaal*. Otherwise, they will not be able to **cook** today's **dinner**. *Sajjad Shaheb* puts his hand **inside** his **pocket** in **search** of his money bag. These days, it seems to be getting lighter and lighter. "Is there enough money inside?" This anxious thought makes him *shrink** like a "*lojjaboti lota*", which shrinks its leaves **inwards** if anyone touches it.



The *lojjaboti lota* plant, by K. Ridwana

He *murmurs** silently in his own mind, “What is the highest **priority** right now, getting good grades or bringing **essentials** like food and medicine for my family members?” He has to choose between these two important options. It feels like the most difficult decision he has ever had to make, even more difficult than the assignment and exams that lie **ahead** of him.

List of Bangla Words

Shaheb: Bangla word for ‘Mr.’

Savar: Name of a city near Dhaka - the capital

Chaal: rice; the staple /main food for Bangladeshi people

Jolpai: Olives

Kamranga: sour fruit / also called starfruit

Kalo jam: blackberry

Pittha: kind of pancake; a Bangladeshi local food

Lojjaboti lota: Shy creeper; shame plant; Mimosa

Learning Activities

Vocabulary

High frequency words from the second 1000 General Service Word List. These words are very common in English, so you should learn any that you do not already know before learning the academic and off-list words below.

1.

advice	clock	grammar	pushed	tomorrow
afraid	cook	hungry	regular	uncomfortable
afternoon	dinner	immediate	reminds	worry
ahead	dissatisfied	information	rice	
anxious	engineering	inside	salary	

attend	entire	lesson	search
bag	essentials	(a) lot (of)	skilled
(a) bit (of/about)	excitement	medicine	suddenly
blind	extra	parents	terrible
charming	gap	pocket	tired/tiredness

High Frequency words from the Academic Word List. These words are common in academic English. Learn these after you have learned the words in list one.

2.

adjust	computer	ignores	priority
adult	definitely	job	promotion
assignment	energy	located	relying
aware	final / finally	mature	submission / submit
colleagues	grade	option	symbol

***Off-list words.** These words are less common in English. Only learn these words if you already know all the words in lists 1 and 2 above.

accent	diploma	inwards	script	smart/smartness
bachelor	exam	jam (as in traffic jam)	semester	traffic
boss/bosses	eyebrows	junior	senior	unkind
classmates	fluent	murmurs	shrink	
classroom	inferior	pharmacy	shy	

Comprehension Questions

1. Remembering: What were the writer's other priorities besides study and work? Why was he worried?

2. Understanding: What does the writer mean by the following expressions? (Use the context of the story to help you.)

- 'in their bag'
- 'raised eyebrows'
- 'get a promotion'
- to be 'smart'

3. Understanding: Why is it so important for *Sajjad Shaheb* to complete his university course? What might happen if he is not successful?

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Analysing: What is the difference between a degree and a diploma? Which one has the higher value, and why? How is the experience of studying at university different for older people and younger people? How is it the same? What causes those differences?

2. Applying: If you were *Sajjad Shaheb*, and you were almost home at the end of a long day, what would you do (would you go back to the city and get the medicine and rice, or would you go home and keep studying)? Give reasons, in English, for your answer.

3. Applying: If you are a young person, do you think you would like the chance to return to university as an older learner? Why/Why not? If you are an older person, and you have returned to study, what were your reasons for doing so? What would make it easier for older people to re-enter university (or high-school) and improve their educational level? How could this be made possible?

4. Evaluating: What do you think about the idea of older people, or even retired people, returning to university to continue their studies? Do you know an older person who has returned to university to study? If so, what subjects did they study? What difficulties did they face (that you know of)? In general terms, what might be the benefits (to society) of encouraging older people to continue their studies or return to university? What might be the drawbacks? What should be a person's first priority, family or study? Why?

5. Creating: Work in a small group. (Suggestion: your group size should be four or five people at most). Imagine you are the different members of *Sajjad Shaheb's* family. He has come home late, and he forgot to bring the medicine and the rice that you need. Create a short play that shows this situation using the ideas and information from the story. Your play should describe everyone's point of view clearly and should reach a solution that works for everyone. Write a script of what each person will say. Decide who each character will be. Practise your play, then perform it to your

classmates. Try to do this without reading from your script. Publish your script so that others can read it. You could even create a video and make your play into a short movie.