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Constructing the Foundations of Capacity Building: An Activity Theory Analysis of the English in Action Baseline Studies

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1 Introduction

This paper offers insights from an activity theory perspective into the English in Action (EiA) project in an attempt to reveal the motivations accompanying the selection of particular areas of focus for the baseline studies. An overview of the background to the project is provided, followed by a review of the individual baseline studies. The paper then provides an activity theory analysis that reviews the attachment of individual study topics to the components of an activity theory framework.

2 Background and Aims of English in Action (EiA) Bangladesh

The English in Action project aims to develop communicative English language learning and teaching in Bangladesh over a 9-year period from May 2008. Funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development, the EiA Project's goal is to 'contribute to the economic growth of Bangladesh by providing English language as a tool for better access to the world economy' (DfID, 2008 p. 5). The purpose of the planned interventions aimed at groups of school students, teachers and adults is to 'increase significantly the number of people able to communicate in English, to levels that enable them to participate fully in economic and social activities and opportunities' (DfID, 2008 p. 5). Initiatives actioned in three sectors (Primary, Secondary and Adult) will utilise a range of media technologies in order to increase motivation and access to communicative English resources and enhance and extend the necessary learning and teaching practices.

A programme of research, monitoring and evaluation activities will assess the extent to which the EiA Project achieves its purpose and goal. These 'RME' activities will focus not only upon outputs within the three sectors, but also pay attention to issues that are significant across the project as a whole. Within the first year a set of project-wide Baseline Studies were planned and carried out before the various sector interventions were launched. These studies will be repeated and extended in each of the Project's three-year phases to enable comparisons to be made to determine what improvements have occurred over time.

The initial Baseline Studies serve a number of purposes, which can be summarised in the following manner. Firstly, they support a clear demonstration of the current situation relating to the teaching and learning of English 'on the ground' and the contexts for communicative use of English. Secondly, the studies serve to inform focused, desirable outputs and activities for each sector and the project as a whole as it progresses. Thirdly,

the studies will provide a reliable basis for comparison by constituting an appropriate range of base measures against which a range of project outputs and activities can subsequently be evaluated.

3 The Baseline Studies: BL1 – BL6

Each of the six Baseline Studies concentrates upon separate, but related fields for consideration in relation to developing the use of communicative English within Bangladesh. These are as follows:

BL1 - English Language Proficiency: Investigating the level of competence in the use of spoken English in schools and among adults in the community. About 5,000 interviews have been conducted with students and teachers in selected Government and NGO Primary and Secondary schools in a variety of locations (urban, semi-urban and rural), and with adults living in the environs of the schools. Each interviewee's spoken English was evaluated against the criteria of the 12-point Trinity College English Language scale (Trinity College London, 2007).

BL2 - Socio-Linguistic Factors: This study had two parts. Study 2a, achieved through interviews with pupils, teachers and adults in the community (2,500 in total), looked into the motivation for learning English and the interviewees' experiences of using communicative English. Study 2b involved interviewing employers in and around Dhaka in, for example: garment manufacturers, communications companies, the hospitality industry and government departments together with administrators in post-school educational institutions to assess the nature of the demand for competence in communicative English in the job market.

BL3 - Teachers' Pedagogical Practices: This study aimed at understanding the existing methods by which English language is taught in schools through the observation of actual teaching in classrooms. It looked at English teaching in a range of Government and NGO Primary and Secondary schools, with a total of 252 observations completed in the region of 100 schools.

BL4 - Materials and Resources to Support English Teaching and Learning: This study was conducted to audit the existing materials and resources that are available in Bangladesh to support English language teaching and learning.

BL5 - Training Activities and Resources to Support the Teaching and Learning of English: This study involved auditing the existing training arrangements for teaching English in schools and colleges. It also reviewed the vocationally-oriented provision for adults, such as learning within companies and in private 'coaching schools' for migrant workers.

BL6 - The Technology Environment: This study examined the existing technological infrastructure and its impact upon people within Bangladesh. This also had two parts, Study 6a involved desk research to review the current media and technology provision

while Study 6b involved surveying individuals' familiarity with and use of technology (2,500 school pupils, teachers and adults in the community).

4 Why these Baseline Studies?

As the EiA Project's purpose is to 'increase significantly the number of people able to communicate in English' (DfID, 2008 p. 5), there is obviously a need to determine the extent of competence in spoken English (BL1) before the various interventions commence in order to provide a base for comparison with similar data collected at several stages in the future. Two main points need to be emphasised here. First, within the school system in Bangladesh there is no formal testing of oral or aural skills in English, so no existing assessment of competence was available. Second, the pilot phase of EiA will not be national in scope, but will be limited to a range of Upazilas in the central part of Bangladesh, accordingly the assessments for BL1 were largely undertaken within the same geographical area.

At the outset of the EiA project it was also necessary to ascertain the situation relating to other contributory factors that could influence significantly the attainment of the Project's purpose. Again, the information collected provides a base for comparison with similar data that will be collected as the project proceeds. These pertinent contributory factors are discussed below.

Communicative English is more likely to be developed effectively if learners and their teachers are highly motivated. Earlier sources have indicated that there is a widespread desire among children and adults to be better able to communicate in English (Magogwe, 2009; Tripathi, 1998). However, the EiA Project is concerned with developing communicative English not as an end in itself (i.e. intrinsic/integrative motivation) but as a tool that will enable people in Bangladesh 'to participate fully in economic and social activities and opportunities' (DfID, 2008 p. 5) (i.e. extrinsic/instrumental motivation Lai, 1999). Study BL2 examined not only the motivations and experiences of learners and teachers, but also the demand in the workplace and in post-school education for communicative English.

English is taught as a compulsory subject in Bangladeshi schools. However, the proportion of students succeeding in the national school examinations is a cause for concern and it is widely acknowledged that only a minority of the population are reasonably competent in communicative English. While the national 'English for Today' curriculum stresses communicative use of the language, this does not appear to be effectively implemented (for a fuller discussion see Imam, 2005). Study BL3 examined the current classroom practices in English lessons, as the EiA interventions in the Primary and Secondary sectors seek to enhance and supplement pedagogical practices for communicative English.

Effective teaching and learning of communicative English are supported by the availability of suitable materials and resources; they are also facilitated by training and development in the use of appropriate pedagogic practices. Studies BL4 and BL5

established the current position in respect of these factors. The EiA interventions in the primary, secondary and adult sectors will all utilise media technologies to achieve their aims, so it was necessary to establish the nature of the technology landscape currently existing in Bangladesh. In terms of provision, the availability and reach of broadcasting, telecommunications and computing facilities have all been investigated in the course of conducting BL6. At the same time, surveys of school students and adults have assessed the levels of access to technology and familiarity with its use. Technology access and use is likely to change significantly over the life of the project and there is potential for influences external to the EiA interventions (e.g. music and films in English) to make an impact (Rahman, 2005).

In short, the opportunity to conduct a wide range of Baseline Studies will supply important details regarding a range of key considerations that contribute to the communicative English environment in Bangladesh. The Baseline Studies will provide demonstrably reliable evidence of teacher's current classroom practices and determine the extent of available materials and types of teacher development practices. They will provide insight into the motivations and aspirations of individuals associated with a range of communicative English opportunities and help to describe significant features of the technology environment that impact on communicative English opportunities. The first of these Baseline Studies (BL1) has, for example, created a benchmark for current competence in communicative English. This cornerstone baseline activity will provide the first reliable measure of spoken English competence to have been established in Bangladesh on such a scale. (The Trinity assessors interviewed 4,012 school students, 462 teachers and 268 community adults.).

Finally, during the three-year pilot phase, 2008-2011, EiA intends to make contributions to the capacity for communicative English language learning that are both scalable during the lifespan of the project and sustainable in the longer term. The Baseline Studies will supply appropriate qualitative and quantitative measures against which to document the extent of changes in the communicative English environment over time. These measures, recording as they do a snapshot of the environment at the outset of the project, form the yardstick against which progress towards achieving effective communicative English language acquisition at scale in Bangladesh through EiA project interventions, will be assessed. Comparisons will be possible against the data collected during similar studies carried out during future phases of the project.

4.1 Baseline Studies - an Activity Theory analysis

The baseline studies take place in a context and to be of value the studies that are undertaken need to capture key elements of this context, documenting influences that impact, positively and negatively on the goals and purpose of the project. Without appropriately taking this context into account, activity theorists such as Engeström (1987) maintain that interpreting the meaning of an activity (such as the EiA project interventions) would be difficult to characterize appropriately. The context that the EiA project is working in is that current communicative English teaching and learning activity in Bangladesh is at too low a level and is not achieving the desired outcomes, the EiA

project aims to positively influence the characteristics of this teaching and learning activity and achieve improved outcomes. Defining the context in which the EiA project would be working started with a clear articulation of the parameters of the communicative environment. These were then mapped onto the various baseline studies in order to create an appropriate evidence base which detailed these parameters, i.e. describing the context and the conditions at the inception of the project. Figure 1 shows these parameters and the mapping of the Baseline Studies.

Contextualising motivations & aspirations (BL2a)	Benchmark spoken English ability (BL1)	Determine current classroom practices (BL3)
Comprehend communities of interest & influence (BL2a, 2b & 6a)	Learning to Communicate in English	Establish extent of existing teaching materials (BL4)
Understand the key components of the technology environment (BL6a & 6b)	Detail opportunities for training & development (BL5)	

Figure 1: The Communicative Environment

Analysing the baseline studies by employing the components of activity theory provides an opportunity to focus in on them in a meaningful way to reveal the key considerations and motivations underpinning the choices made in the six studies. Activity Theory will support the tangible representation of the hitherto tacit knowledge of the project and offer an insight into how the task of gathering valid and reliable evidence regarding the existing communicative environment was approached. A further value of an Activity Theory analysis is that it can be repeated and revised at different stages in the project cycle, which should reveal how change has been achieved and in particular, which components of the activity theory framework are most attached to progress towards project goals (Blin & Munroe, 2007; Kirkup & Kirkwood, 2005; Waycott, 2004). A great deal of evidence will of course be required before any such outcomes could be positively linked to specific EiA intervention strategies.

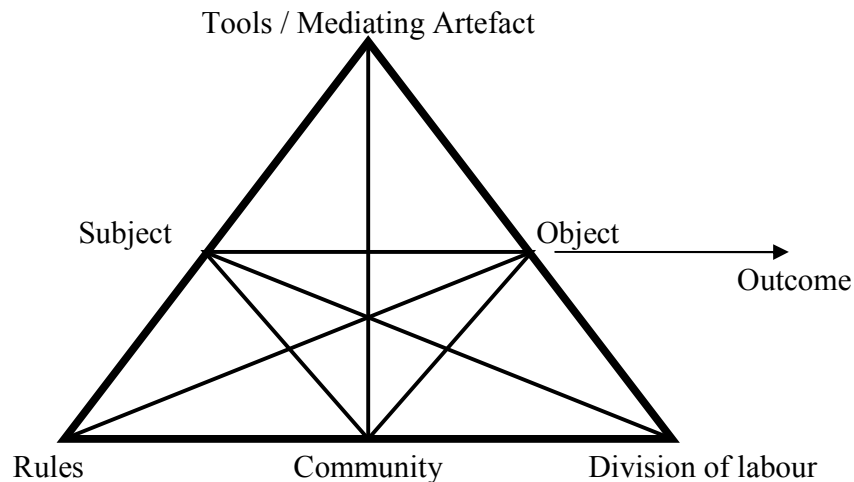


Fig. 2: Activity System Triangle (adapted from Engeström, 1987)

In activity theory terms, the *Subject's* activity is directed towards the *Object* and is mediated by the *Tools*. The activity transforms the *Object* into an *Outcome*. Three further elements, *Rules*, *Community* and the *Division of labour* play a part in the progress of the activity. In terms of the EiA project the elements of the Activity System Triangle can be described as follows and related to the Baseline Studies.

Subject

The subject in activity theory can be used to refer to individual or collective subjects. For the purposes of the EiA project it is useful to think of 'learners' as individual subjects while at the same time appreciating that the ambitions of the project are to transform the learning experiences at scale. Learners are individuals in a shifting range of contexts, they could be defined as students, teachers, adults, community members, family members and so forth at different times with different aspirations and changing motivations (Green, 1999). BL2a informs this element.

Tools/Mediating Artefacts

The means by which an individual has the opportunity to reach their potential in communicative English involves the application of particular tools/mediating artefacts. For example, it would be difficult to appreciate how learning communicative English is achieved without an adequate awareness of the available teaching materials and resources together with current classroom teaching practices and the part played in school by peers, colleagues and friends. Added to this, it is clearly important to understand the mediating contribution of the exposure to English through mass media devices both within school and in the wider community. BL4 and both parts of BL6 contribute to this understanding.

Object

The object, the driving force of the EiA project, is to increase the potential to learn to communicate in English. This could be described as a 'general object' (Engeström, 1993), one which is jointly appreciated. While individual subjects will have their own

unique objectives (e.g. better job prospects through use of English), the whole community will share an objective (i.e. better communicative English competence) and it is important to understand the extent of complementarity of both individual and collective objectives. Through the actions of the project, the objects will become *Outcomes*. BL1 serves to measure the level of competence in communicative English.

Rules

In a range of contexts the Baseline Studies will contribute demonstrations of particular rules that govern the potential to achieve communicative English competence in the activity system. There are, for example, current institutional norms that govern how the curriculum is operationalised, examination formats administered, accreditation strategies formalised and expectations of teaching and learning practice in the school context and beyond, these are studied by BL3 and BL5. In the working environment, both at school and more broadly, these studies will enable us to understand the rules that currently determine how this system functions.

Community

The community shares with the subjects the same 'general object'. Active engagement between subjects and members of the community, i.e. the teachers, other school officials and school management committees etc, contribute towards the achievement of the *Outcome*. This element is studied by BL3 and BL5. Also important in any consideration of the 'community' in which the EiA activity takes place is the experience and expectations of employers, which is the subject of BL2b.

Division of labour

Understanding how both the allocation of aspects of the activity (e.g. who does what; how active or passive the participants are) and the notion of ownership and control of communicative English competency as currently practiced is also the subject of BL3 and BL5.

It can be noted that Baseline Studies 3 and 5 sought to gather evidence that covered a wide range of pedagogic practice from teaching in the classroom to the provision of English Language training and, as such were able to contribute to an understanding of several elements of the Activity System Triangle.

4.2 Conclusion

Change and capacity building in terms of communicative English competence are at the heart of this project. Lasting outcomes will only be achieved if appropriate change can be engendered and sustained. The types of interventions adopted by members of the EiA project will therefore need to be targeted towards achieving changes in practice in key areas. One means of targeting these areas can be supported by an aspect of activity theory not previously identified in this paper: *contradictions* (Engeström, 1993). This refers to potential incongruities between different elements of the activity system and has previously proved productive in educational settings (Issroff & Scanlon, 2002; Roussou, Oliver, & Slater, 2008; Trowler & Knight, 2000). It is hoped through the evidence

recorded in the context of the baseline studies to demonstrate *contradictions* in the current communicative English activity system (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). The drive to understand particular actions, operations or difficulties related to current practice could be ‘the moving force behind disturbances and innovations, and eventually behind the change and development of the system’ (Engeström, 1993 p. 72). Innovation and change, it can be argued, are the only ways to achieve higher levels of communicative English competence in Bangladesh. Ultimately, they may be the only means by which Bangladeshi nationals will be able to communicate in English to levels that enable them to take up opportunities from which they may derive social and or economic benefit.

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