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**Language planning, English language education and development aid in Bangladesh**

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## **Abstract**

The increased status of English as the language of international communication and business has meant that development aid has increasingly been used to finance language planning initiatives aimed at improving and/or expanding English language education. The intended outcome of this aid is often to provide expanded economic returns and opportunities for those who learn the language. But is it really the case that they receive these benefits? In this paper I attempt to form a deeper understanding of the relationship between English language skills and economic value by providing a meta-analysis and critical evaluation of eleven research studies. By critically evaluating this research using Sen's capabilities approach (1999), I find that while English language skills might enhance opportunities for individuals, they also appear to reinforcing embedded inequalities and therefore not necessarily contributing to the wellbeing of societies. English language education may have limited impact without sufficient political and economic stability. Moreover, there are ongoing and significant needs to develop literacy and numeracy in local and national languages. Equipped with this more nuanced understanding of the value of English, I argue that development aid and language planning initiatives can make more significant contributions to holistic development and social justice.

**Key words:** Language planning, English language education, development aid, Bangladesh, capability approach, inequality

## **Introduction**

The domain of language planning includes deliberate efforts to influence language learning. The increased status of English as the language of international communication and business has meant that development aid has increasingly been used to finance language planning initiatives aimed at improving and/or expanding English language education. This phenomenon had become so widespread by 2002 that Bruthiaux (2002, p.289) noted that development efforts are ‘inextricably linked in governmental and academic circles as well as in the media with English language education’. In the recent past, the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID), the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank have all supported national language planning initiatives aimed at enhancing and expanding English education in Bangladesh (see further Hamid & Erling, 2016). The intended outcome of development aid being used to support English language education is often to provide expanded economic returns and opportunities for those who learn the language. This discourse can be seen in the description of English in Action (EIA), a recent English language education project in Bangladesh, which ran from 2009-2017, and was funded with £50 million by DfID. The project was designed to work in government schools to improve English language teaching and in communities to target adult learners (see Solly & Woodward, 2012). The EIA project website emphasizes that it is attempting to enable 25 million Bangladeshi adults and school children to improve their English language skills. This, it states, “will help them access better economic and social opportunities’ and provide individuals with ‘a route into work and out of poverty’” (EIA, 2017).

The use of development aid to finance language planning initiatives that support English language education seems to be primarily driven by discourses of English as a language of international development, i.e. a language associated with high social, cultural and economic capital (Seargeant & Erling, 2011). This discourse is based on assumptions that

English can act as a panacea for poverty, skills deficits and economic challenges. Evidence is not commonly drawn on in these discussions because until recently, there have been only a few rigorous studies exploring a potential relationship between English language skills and economic gain for individuals and societies. However, there are exceptions, one being a study conducted in India by Azam, Chin, & Prakash. (2010). Amongst other findings, they report a 13% wage increase for individuals who speak a little English and 34% for those with high proficiency (based on self-reporting). Such figures appear impressive and are therefore quoted widely and celebrated in the media (see Nagarajan, 2014). However, the detailed findings of these studies are rarely mentioned and the complex array of social and economic factors that influence individual and group outcomes are often not discussed. This omission of detail limits the possibilities of such research to provide an appropriate information base on which language planning decisions can be made.

In this paper I attempt to form a deeper understanding of the relationship between English language skills and economic value in order to better inform language planning initiatives that support English language education as well as the funding of such initiatives with development aid. I will do so by considering the example of the EIA project in Bangladesh and by conducting a meta-analysis of the research available to inform the project. This analysis includes six large-scale, international quantitative studies, four medium-scale quantitative studies published in relation to EIA, and one qualitative study conducted in rural Bangladeshi communities. Critically evaluating this research using Sen's capabilities approach (1999), I find that while English language skills might enhance opportunities for individuals, they also appear to reinforcing embedded inequalities and therefore not necessarily contributing to the wellbeing of societies. Similarly, English language education may have limited impact in polities where there is insufficient political and economic stability. Moreover, my study shows that there remain ongoing and significant needs to

develop literacy and numeracy in local and national languages in Bangladesh. Equipped with this more nuanced understanding of the value of English, I argue that development aid and language planning initiatives can make more significant contributions to more holistic development and social justice.

### **Analytical Framework**

Before analysing the relationship between English language skills and economic value, and its implications for language planning and development aid, I first define the terms and perspectives that are relevant to my analysis: development aid, development and language planning. In this paper I use the term ‘development aid’ to refer to funding from governments and other agencies to support low and middle income countries with their economic, environmental, social, and political development. There are many contested views on what ‘development’ is – and whether, and if so, how it can be measured. Generally it refers to a process of intentional change over time – usually positive change or ‘progress’ in accordance with explicit societal objectives (Hettne, 2009, p.9). From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, development aid was targeted towards macro-economic and infrastructure development (usually assessed through GDP) in which any individual development which occurred was purely incidental. More recently, instrumentalist perspectives of development have often relied on human capital theory (HCT) – or the idea that positive change is usually attributed to increases in human skills, knowledge and experience and so the individual has become much more significant. While HCT is prominent in the discourses of development aid, I align myself with more holistic conceptions of development, which are increasingly influential, as they recognise the central importance of rights, freedoms, capabilities and equity (McCowan & Unterhalter, 2015, p.3). These broader conceptions embrace improved governance, security, better health, the eradication of poverty, social cohesion and environmental sustainability,

amongst other things. Sen's capabilities approach, for example, proposes that development should be perceived and evaluated not only in terms of economic gain but with regard to the freedom for all people to do and be what they have reason to value (Sen, 1999).

In both HCT and the capabilities approach, education is seen as central to development and hence, development aid has long been used to support education initiatives (Rassool, Heugh & Mansoor, 2007), with total aid to education increasing in real terms by 360 per cent, from US\$2.9 billion in 1995 to US\$13.3 billion in 2010 (Ridell & Niño-Zarazúab, 2016). Influenced by the HCT approach, development agencies such as the World Bank and DfID have promoted policies aimed at developing skills, including language skills, and training local workforces to stimulate economic growth and to foster social and socio-economic development at both the individual and national level (McCowan, 2015, p.32). In the capability approach, however, investment in education is valued for the key role it can play in creating capabilities and in converting them into valued outcomes that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and societies. A common aim of much development aid is to provide opportunities for poor children to access – and benefit from – formal education. One aspect of this involves getting children into school, while another is improving the quality of education received at school. By improving both access to and quality of schooling, the intention is that children will have more opportunities for learning and enhancing their capabilities in ways that improve their lives and communities. Issues of language planning and policy are increasingly recognised as being fundamental to this (cf. Pinnock, 2009; Tikly, 2016). For example, Sen (2010) sees local, national and global languages as playing central but different roles in removing barriers to opportunities (cf. Rassool, 2013). For example, capability in a global language such as English can be a key factor in accessing information, as well as economic, social and cultural opportunities within an increasingly globalised economy (see Tikly, 2016, p.408).

In this paper, I take up Cooper's definition of language planning as "deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes" (1989, p.45). Like Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), I see language planning as a key site and mechanism for language policies carried out at global, national and local levels (Chua & Baldauf, 2010; Rassool, 2013). I situate the rise of the academic study of language planning alongside the emergence of the modern concept of 'development'. I see the field of language planning – like development studies – as one that evolved out of post-colonialism and a perceived obligation to support the development of educational systems. There is therefore a long-established relationship between language planning and development aid. Development agents have been involved in devising and implementing language planning decisions since their emergence following World War II and the independence of a number of nations in Africa and Asia (cf. Street 2001, UNESCO 2005). Language planning has been used to influence or inform decisions about which local, national and international language(s) to use as the medium of instruction and which to teach as additional languages in a country's national curriculum (Deumert, 2009; Lo Bianco, 2010). This influence has contributed to the continuation of the 'postcolonial condition' in which colonial languages are privileged (Rassool et al., 2007), and a number of scholars have pointed out that investment in English language education (and in other former colonial languages) in development contexts has been motivated by the economic and geopolitical interests of donor nations (e.g. Bruthiaux, 2002; Phillipson, 1992; Ricento, 2000). However, there have also been both local and national demands, particularly in countries with colonial ties to the U.K. or U.S. for English language education in terms of social cohesion, access to economic and social resources and contributing to the development debate itself (Bartlett, 2013; Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Ferguson, 2013).



In this paper I follow the tradition of contemporary language planning studies, which have increasingly shifted towards critically analysing the ideologies which influence language planning (Taylor-Leech & Liddicoat, 2014) and examining the specific socio-political and historical contexts in which these ideologies emerge (Heller & Duchêne, 2016; Ricento, 2000). I argue that language planning initiatives supported by development aid largely rely on ideologies of ‘English as a language of international development’ (Sergeant & Erling, 2011), rather than on research evidence and recognition of the complexity of the language planning context. English is commonly associated with high social, cultural and economic capital, and English language skills are often positioned in language planning documents in low-income contexts as a means of boosting the economy and increasing opportunities for individuals. This perspective has contributed to the increasing prominence of English in the national curricula of school systems across the world, as well as it being promoted through projects such as EIA – in which development aid is used to expand or improve English language education. This ideology aligns well with HCT approaches to providing resources of value in the globalised new economy. However, the extent to which such language planning initiatives for English language education are able to expand capabilities and contribute to social justice will be explored and problematised below.

### **Context: Language planning and development aid in Bangladesh**

Before moving on to the analysis and critique, I will briefly describe the sociopolitical and historical context in which the relationship between English language skills and economic value is being explored, and how it may impact on the funding of language planning.

Bangladesh provides a particularly fruitful site of analysis because language planning in this country has been uniquely influenced by colonial histories, national priorities and development initiatives. As explored in depth elsewhere (Hamid & Erling, 2016; Sergeant,

Erling, Solly, Chowdhury & Rahman, 2016), the emergence of the country is essentially the result of a language planning problem and the intensity of feeling around the national language is reflected in the name of the country, which literally means ‘Country of Bangla’. At the end of British colonial rule, the current territory of Bangladesh was established as one of two wings of the Dominion of Pakistan —then called East Pakistan. Urdu had been imposed as the state language. Protest and a war of independence ensued, leading to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Bangla was inscribed as the sole national language in the nation’s constitution, with other Indigenous languages largely ignored (see Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). The teaching of English was initially restricted to a few elite schools following independence but the language was incrementally reintroduced into the national curriculum. In 1991, purportedly in recognition of the need for English globally and the lack of competence in the language in the wider society, English was introduced as a compulsory subject from Grade 1 in government schools and made essential for the successful completion of school-leaving exams. While these language-planning decisions seem to have been motivated by the principle of social justice, little attention has been paid to their realistic implementation (Hamid & Erling 2016, p.39).

As Bangladesh has a low position on the Human Development Index (142 out of 188 according to UNDP, 2015) and has one of the lowest figures for investment in education in South Asia (UNESCO, 2013), the country has consistently relied on development aid for educational initiatives, including the implementation of language planning. Development aid to education has generally focused on the enhancement of literacy development in Bangla, the national language, and on the quality of education in government schools. While there have been improvements in school enrolment in recent years, the literacy rate still hovers around 54% for 11-45 year olds (BBS, 2013), impacting negatively on the delivery of quality education in general, as well as the provision of English education in government schools.

However, the implementation of language planning initiatives including acquisition planning for English has received specific attention. For example, development aid has been used to support the English language teaching improvement project, which ran from 1997-2008, and the follow-up project English in Action (EIA), a nine-year, £50 million project, both funded by DfID. EIA was designed to increase access to English by working in government schools to improve English language teaching and in communities to target adult learners (see Solly & Woodward, 2012). As stated on the project website:

English in Action aims at enabling 25 million Bangladeshi adults and school children to improve their English language skills that will help them access better economic and social opportunities. (EIA, 2017)

It continues:

English in Action is about equipping the poorest people with language skills that will help them find jobs, engage in entrepreneurial activities and improve their standard of living. (EIA, 2017)

Project discourses rest on the simplistic assumptions that English language skills lead to employment opportunities and improved earning potential for individuals. The complexity of the socioeconomic, linguistic and educational context which has hindered development despite significant development aid in the past is ignored, and the ways in which language planning initiatives might contribute to more holistic, national development and the dismantling of inequalities is not addressed.

### **Research synthesis and critique**

When EIA was being planned and designed in Bangladesh in the late 2000s, there was little published research about the status and quality of English language teaching to rely on.

Neither was there anything beyond anecdotal evidence about the relationship between

English language skills and value. On the whole, there are very few studies that have empirically investigated this relationship, both because a dearth of data and the difficulty of proving causality. Studies are increasingly being undertaken in this area in response to a demand for evidence in planning and funding education and development initiatives. Such evidence may then be used to further justify such aid projects. It is therefore of utmost importance that the findings of such research are well understood and that they appropriately shape further development aid to language planning initiatives. In the following sections of this article, I provide a meta-analysis and critical evaluation of eleven studies on the relationship between English language skills and value, accompanied by a discussion of how such research can inform language planning initiatives and their funding in developing countries in general and Bangladesh in particular.

The quantitative studies considered for this analysis were identified through a systematic search of social science databases. The focus of the search was on recent and reliable empirical research published about the context of Bangladesh. As the initial search uncovered no large-scale studies specific to Bangladesh, it was extended to include South Asia. Research published prior to 2005 was excluded, since the context of education for development changed so significantly after the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and because approaches used to estimate returns to education have been much improved in recent years (see Aslam & Rawal, 2015). Studies for which the reliability and validity of methods employed were questionable were excluded (see further Erling, 2014). A total of six studies were identified, all of which are large-scale quantitative studies. Three of the studies include data from several international contexts, with one of them being in South Asia (Arcand & Grin, 2013; Ku & Zussman, 2010; Lee, 2012). They provide international comparisons about the nature of the relationship between skills in English in a population and economic development at the national level. Three further quantitative studies focus on the

value of English for individuals living in the South Asia region. Two of these studies compare findings from India and Pakistan (Aslam, Kingdon, De & Kumar, 2010; Aslam, Kingdon & Kumar, 2012) and a third focuses on **returns to** English-language proficiency in the national context of India (Azam et al., 2010).

These large-scale studies are complemented by three medium-scale quantitative studies that were conducted in the national context of Bangladesh as part of EIA (Damiani & Gowland, 2013; Euromonitor, 2013; and MottMacDonald, 2013; see also Erling & Power, 2014). This research aimed to assess the relationship between English language competence and economic development in Bangladesh and explore the value and potential of English language teaching improvement projects in the country, in part to justify the work of EIA. Finally, a small-scale qualitative study conducted in two rural communities in Bangladesh, conducted independently of EIA, is presented, providing further insight into the needs and perceived value of English at the local level (see further Erling, Seargeant, Solly, Chowdhury & Rahman, 2012; Erling, Seargeant & Solly, 2014; Seargeant et al., 2016).

### **Large-scale international studies**

The section considers findings from the six large-scale quantitative studies cited above. The first of these is by Ku and Zussman (2010), an international, macro-level study of the value of English in promoting trade between non-English speaking countries that do not share a national language. Ku and Zussman constructed a dataset based on mean national scores in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) spanning thirty years in 100 countries (including Bangladesh). Controlling for other factors influencing trade, they argue that:

English proficiency has a strong and statistically significant effect on bilateral trade flows .... The results thus demonstrate that acquired proficiency in English can help

countries overcome historically determined language barriers. (Ku & Zussman, 2010, p. 251)

Arcand and Grin (2013) take issue with Ku and Zussman's work for implying that linguistic diversity can be a barrier to economic growth, thus reinforcing ideologies of English as a language of international development. They devise a statistical model (called the instrumental variable) to investigate the relationship between scores on the TOEFL test and economic development (measured by GDP) in postcolonial contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia. In contrast to Ku and Zussman, they find that widespread competence in English is not necessarily associated with a higher level of economic development in the countries analysed. Instead, they conclude that societal multilingualism – including the use of English –increases income per capita. Arcand and Grin (2013) therefore suggest that local and regional languages may be of particular value in informal labour markets, which tend to be local (see also Bruthiaux, 2002). Moreover, the use of local languages in education may account for a stronger relationship between education and economic development (cf. Coyne, 2015). This research thus does not disprove the value of English for international trade but it does provide evidence that languages other than English are valuable in terms of developing local economies and enhancing education so that it supports economic growth.

Another study using GDP per capita and TOEFL test scores to examine the relationship between English proficiency and economic development was conducted by Lee (2012). He finds that countries with higher levels of English proficiency among their populations are likely to grow faster economically in Asia and Europe, but not necessarily in Africa or Latin America. This finding suggests that the value of English depends on other larger development factors such as the accumulation of physical capital, technology and social capital (cf. Permani, 2009). Lee (2012, p.18) thus concludes that:

English proficiency will have a positive impact on economic development if the increase in English proficiency is complemented with a minimum threshold of physical capital, technology, political stability, good governance and other factors.

The improvement in English proficiency without sufficient accumulation of physical capital, technology and social capital will not add significantly to the economic development of a country.

So while both Ku and Zussman (2010) and Arcand and Grin (2013) have shown that the promotion of English language learning might positively influence activity in global markets, Lee's study (2012) indicates that English language education on its own will not allow nations to overstep other socioeconomic obstacles. The study counters assumptions that investments in English language education will provide a simple remedy for poverty and inclusion and shows that such investments may have limited impact in polities without sufficient political and economic stability.

Recognising that education planning and policy does not always have a firm research basis, the DfID-funded Research Consortium on Educational Outcomes and Poverty (RECOUP) was designed to examine the impact of education on people in developing countries and how this is affected by the broader context. RECOUP studies investigated the relationship between education and economic gain at the individual and group level and focused on English language skills as one aspect of this relationship. Their research involved a purpose-designed household survey administered to over one thousand urban and rural households each in Pakistan and India between 2006 and 2008. Education was measured in terms of years of schooling and tests of literacy, numeracy and English language. The studies found that in both India and Pakistan, there are economic and cognitive benefits for individuals, as they promote a person's potential for entry into lucrative occupations (Aslam et al., 2010; Aslam et al., 2012). Moreover, they found that individual English language skills

are highly rewarded in both India and Pakistan: of the skills measured in their study (literacy, numeracy and English language), the largest increase in earnings was generated by English language knowledge. Thus, English does seem to increase the earning potential of individuals in some contexts. However, these studies also found significant variability in returns to English in that its value is influenced by local labour market constraints and is rewarded differently in different sectors of employment. The value of English varies along with an individual's other socioeconomic variables, such as gender, age, ethnicity and class (cf. Kobayashi, 2007; Levinsohn, 2004). So, for example, English language skills are rewarded more highly among Indian men than among Pakistani men, and this disparity is likely to be related to the local economy and the types of jobs available in each country (Aslam et al., 2010, p.21). Moreover, there are gender differences in the value of English: English language skills are rewarded more highly among women in both countries, perhaps because of the relative scarcity of women with these skills.

While the economic value of English has been uncovered in this research, these studies indicate how difficult it is to separate returns to English language skills from returns to education in general. In the context of South Asia, English language skills are more likely to have been acquired at higher levels of schooling, unlike the literacy and numeracy skills measured in the Aslam et al (2012) study. Those individuals with English language skills are also more likely to have a longer experience of schooling and/or to have experienced a higher quality of education. Moreover, those individuals who are likely to have experienced a higher quality of education are more likely to be from more privileged backgrounds (p.113).

A third study was undertaken by the Institute of Labor Economics and focused specifically on returns to English-language skills in India (Azam et al., 2010). It used the India Human Development Survey of 2005 to explore the relationship between English-speaking ability and individual wages (based on self-reporting). As in the RECOUP studies,



Azam et al. (2010) found that English language skills are highly rewarded in South Asia's labour market. They assert that having high proficiency in English (compared to not speaking the language at all) increases the hourly wages of men by 34%, thus having the same economic impact on wages as completing secondary school, and half as much impact as completing a Bachelor's degree. They report that simply being able to speak a little English increases male hourly wages by 13%. This study confirms the variability of **returns to** English found in the RECOUP studies. **Returns to** English were found to be significantly lower for members of India's Scheduled Caste, the historically most disadvantaged grouping in Indian society (Azam et al., 2010, p.26), which led the researchers (2010, p.18) to conclude that:

[...] upward mobility does not come automatically with English skills in India; some obstacles, which likely include long-rooted discrimination against low caste, impede low caste group members even when they have a skill that is valued by the modern labour market.

This study therefore suggests that English language skills do not work as a social equaliser and instead reinforce existing inequalities. Of course, the reported value of a 34% increase in earnings related to fluency in English sounds impressive, which is why this figure is often cited in further research and in the media (e.g. Nagarajan, 2014). However, how English may be accentuating gaps between the more and the less privileged in society is rarely, if ever, mentioned. Such details must be considered in further language planning initiatives and public debates about language policy if they are truly to contribute to holistic development.

Aspects of these studies may be criticised for the methods employed and the measures used for assessing English ability. Arcand and Grin (2013) show that different conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between English and value when different empirical methods are used. Moreover, there is much imprecision and little consistency in the reporting of how English language skills are measured (e.g. self-reporting, TOEFL scores etc.) (see

further Erling, 2014, pg.19-20; Aslam & Rawal, 2015, p.123). Finally, these studies focus primarily on English, making invisible the values of other languages and of multilingualism, which is bound to be highly present in the societies investigated. That withstanding, the messages from this meta-analysis so far shows that people who have English language skills tend to also have higher earnings. However, these studies also emphasise the difficulty of singling out the value of English language skills. Thus, it cannot be concluded with absolute confidence that it is English language skills that relate to economic value, but it may in fact rather be a person's access to higher education and high quality education (which in turn is what makes a person more likely to have had the opportunity to develop English language skills). Moreover, at least three of these studies reveal how value of English varies along with other socioeconomic variables, e.g. co-occurring with longer experience of education. This means that English language skills may not help to level the playing field for people facing disadvantage, either due to gender, age, ethnicity and class, or because of the types of jobs available to them in their local environment.

This trend was also observed by Lee (2012). His study found that English language skills amongst a population become a national advantage only when other factors relating to governance and security are in place. Such findings provide good reason to conclude that that English is reinforcing inequalities between nations and individuals. The message then for language planning and development aid is that (English language) education on its own will not enable a person to overstep other socioeconomic obstacles (cf. Fasih Kingdon, Patrinos, Sakellariou, & Soderbom, 2012). If development is perceived as simply the increase of human capital, the conclusion might be made that English language skills can lead to this. However, if development is seen as the enhancement of human capabilities and social justice, the relationship is less clear and the need for larger, more systematic change becomes apparent.

### **Medium-scale Bangladesh studies**

The six large-scale international studies reviewed above are complemented by medium-scale quantitative research conducted as part of EIA, which provide detail into the specific context of Bangladesh. These three studies employed different methodologies to explore further the relationship between English language skills and economic gain, and serve in some way to justify the EIA project.

The first of these studies was conducted by Euromonitor and was based on an earlier study commissioned by the British Council (Euromonitor, 2010). The 2010 study explores the advantages of English for individuals and societies in five countries, including Bangladesh, and finds strong relationships between English and economic advantage. Two primary methods were used: Interviews conducted with recruitment agencies, corporate businesses, educational institutions and other semi-official sources, and a review of salaries in job advertisements posted on job websites and print media. The study concluded that, while economic growth may be slow in Bangladesh, English provides a key competitive advantage in a difficult employment environment, both for getting a job and receiving a higher salary. Regarding the employment market in the sectors involved in the study (all of which were limited to the formal sector), English was found to be the main business language for most of the companies interviewed. Around 86% of the organisations interviewed said that English language skills were an important factor in recruiting new employees (of which 43% felt that they were very important). In the analysis of job vacancies, 68% required at least an intermediate level of English. With regards to an individual's economic advantage in terms of English language skills, the salary gap between someone who can speak English and someone who cannot was found to be 5-15%. In addition, 77% of the respondents from

companies stated that employees who speak better English advance faster in their careers than those without a good grasp of the language (Euromonitor, 2010).

In 2013, EIA commissioned a follow-up study focussing solely on Bangladesh to provide up-to-date evidence on the economic benefit of English (Euromonitor, 2013). The results were similarly enthusiastic. Following the same methodology as the 2010 study, Euromonitor conducted interviews with ten out of the largest twelve recruitment agencies in Bangladesh, which were mainly located in the capital city of Dhaka. Findings suggested that skills in English help people secure jobs with well-established companies. Employers value language skills for their potential to open up new markets and the ability to communicate with customers and clients in their own language, and particularly in jobs that require international travel. The search of job advertisements found that around 40% of jobs advertised on job portals and 20% of jobs advertised in newspapers require English (the study provides no detail about other language abilities sought). Some companies also require IELTS scores. With regards to an individual's economic advantage of English language skills, Euromonitor reports that companies require at least an intermediate level of English and are willing to pay more for candidates with high proficiency in the language. There was reported to be a 25%-30% increase in salary for jobs where the candidate has good English skills.

While the findings of both of these studies sound impressive in terms of the value of English for individuals, a few caveats must be kept in mind. First of all, the method of interview used in these studies relies almost entirely on participants' perceptions of values of English. That these participants perceive of English as being valuable is not surprising given the focus on large, international companies and recruiting firms. Secondly, these studies were wholly concerned with individuals in waged employment in Bangladesh's formal economy, and primarily in Dhaka. While the number of people working in these sectors is large in real

terms, it only represents a small percentage of Bangladesh's population (11%, according to ADB, 2012). This means that the values for English reported might not be representative of the wider population around the country, who are more likely to work in micro-, small- or medium-enterprises where language use is likely to be different from large companies. While the review of job advertisements may appear to be a more objective measure, it must be kept in mind that in Bangladesh – as elsewhere – a form of credentialism is common, in which English language competence is often interpreted by employers as proxy for being well educated and part of an elite (cf. Barsoum, 2004; Lockwood, 2012). Therefore, such jobs, and the English competence and certification required for them, are likely to only be available to a privileged few, and the values of English reported in these studies are likely to equally reflect other social and educational advantages.

The role of English in formal sector employment in Bangladesh is further explored in a survey that investigates the demand for, and use of, English by employers and in further education (MottMacDonald, 2013). Data collection was limited to the Dhaka area, and the sample of respondents was predominantly male (89% of the 125 respondents). This gender bias reflects the current the working environment in formal sector. The respondents included representatives from IT companies, banks, colleges and universities (both public and private), travel and tourism agencies, hotels and restaurants, ready-made garment factories, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), export agencies and other industries (including newspapers, magazines, advertising agencies and others), so again there is a strong overrepresentation of the formal sector in the study. The majority were personnel from the senior management and/or human resource managers. Respondents were asked what English language requirements they had for their employees and how that related to their activities, the English language skills of their employees and those who apply for jobs. Findings confirmed the need for, and regular use of, English. However, the extent to which a firm's

business involves non-Bangla speakers varied from industry to industry, with the hotel and restaurant industry attaching huge importance to English and ready-made garment factories finding it only important for high-level staff. Furthermore, needs for English differ across the industries according to location within Dhaka, type of client, level of position, and type of job. Regarding the hiring of new employees, 64% of respondents said that they are *very likely* or *quite likely* to employ candidates having intermediate level English language skills. This research, while limited to the formal sector in the country's capital, shows some indication of the varying needs for English across industries. It suggests, as did Aslam et al. (2010), that the value of English depends on the local labour market and sector of employment. However, individuals working outside of the capital or in the informal sector are excluded.

Research conducted by BBC Media Action provides more detail into the value of English for people across socio-economic groups, among skills/unskilled workers and in areas outside the capital. This study used two existing datasets to explore statistical associations between self-reported levels of English proficiency and two variables related to economic status (household expenditure and household income after rent) (see Damiani & Gowland, 2013). The analyses showed a significant but weak relationship between self-reported English proficiency and economic status. Self-reported level of English was able to predict a small percentage of the distribution of household income and family expenditure. In other words, a clear difference in the level of self-reported English proficiency translates into a difference in an individual's level of monthly household income or family expenditure. The benefit is greater for those in skilled occupations.

Using different methodologies, the studies undertaken in Bangladesh all find evidence of a relationship between English language skills and economic value. However, the same caveats apply in interpreting these results as do to the large-scale qualitative research reviewed above. As the studies are primarily limited to the formal sector, it is difficult to

separate values of English language skills from other indicators of social and economic privilege. Even in the BBC Media Action study, which has the most diverse sample, with participants from across the country, the relationship between English and economic value is only weak, and no causality could be determined. Moreover, while these studies provide some indication of uses for English in the formal sector and values of the language for individuals, they shed little light on how these English language skills were acquired, how language skills might contribute to developing the capabilities of individuals and communities, and whether and how the learning of English can help to counter disadvantage.

### **Small-scale qualitative study in two rural Bangladeshi communities**

The studies reviewed above highlight the point that a person's social and economic environment as well as individual circumstances complicate the relationship between English and economic value. This complexity intensifies the need for qualitative research to understand the role of English in people's lives, particularly those from poorer or rural areas, which we tend to know less about. Qualitative studies can tell us more about how language skills contribute to the development of capabilities, and also shed light on wider issues of development beyond economic value (Rassool, 2013). As an example, I present my own small-scale qualitative study 'Attitudes to English as a language for international development in rural Bangladesh'. This study involved participants in a rural area of Bangladesh who do not necessarily have access to the elite jobs surveyed for the EIA studies mentioned above, and investigated how language skills might contribute to developing the capabilities of individuals (see further Erling, et al., 2012; Erling et al., 2014; Seargeant et al., 2016).

The study used interview data from a cross-section of two rural communities in order to compile a picture of perceptions of English. Two Bangladeshi researchers conducted semi-

structured interviews during extended field visits of five days in each community. The interviews elicited participants' perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of education in general, towards the learning of English in particular, and towards the relationship between education, (English) language skills and individual and community development. In total, 28 people were interviewed, 23 male and five female, with an age range of 22 to 62. These participants, whose identities have been protected, included representatives from formal and educated professions (e.g. banker, college teacher, politician and religious leader) to informal and self-employed workers (e.g. barber, farmer, cleaner and rickshaw driver). There was great variation in the education levels of the participants, with some of them reporting very limited formal education and virtually no literacy skills apart from the ability to sign their names. This study provides details of the factors within people's lives that determine values of English.

In this study, we found that even in very rural Bangladeshi communities facing quite severe development challenges there were strong perceptions that English would be of value for people in terms of widening their economic and social opportunities. The perception across the cohort was that knowledge of English offers access to global systems, including technology, better employment opportunities, and work abroad. In addition, there was a range of perceived needs for English in the local community, including reading product descriptions, electricity bills, or information about pesticides. Even in those occupational fields where some people voiced doubts about the usefulness of English (e.g. farming), many of the people actually working in these occupations expressed a desire to learn the language. They noted that those in the community who have skills in English play an important role, as they have access to information that others do not. For example, Devika, a cleaner, mentioned that she was very proud of her daughter because she spoke English and was recognised for this in the community:



Even many elder persons respect her... many people bring their electricity bill to her and say ... can you see the bill and say where should the money be paid and by when?' (Devika, Cleaner)

Here the knowledge of English was linked to respect because of the value Devika's daughter has in the community due to her ability to perform certain tasks which require English-language skills. The previous quote demonstrates that knowledge of English was seen as something that would give them freedom to act on their own and make more informed decisions and choices, and also a prestigious role in the community from which they can help others. However, as the following extract shows, a lack of English can mean that one is reliant on the help of others:

Suppose someone has a poultry business. Lots of information on the poultry medicine is written in English. If he would have read and understood by himself, he would not have asked for someone's help, he could try to read and understand by himself. When you go to someone for help but he's not at home, then many problems can occur. ... I know someone like this ... He is illiterate, he cannot do anything. He has a poultry business and goes to a lot of people when he cannot understand. He would not need to go to someone if he knew English. You will be ashamed after going to someone for one or two days, then you will stop going. (Ferdousi Begum, housewife)

Lack of English, therefore, was seen as something that inhibits people's capabilities and contributes to their lack of status. These attitudes reflect a strong belief in the power of English and a desire to be one of the many who speak the language for reasons of practicality and prestige.

Several participants mentioned, as Ferdousi did, that there were particular things in the community for which knowledge of English was needed, such as user manuals, Roman script and Arabic numerals for understanding prices on packaging and shop signs, and the

sending and receiving of text messages in transliterated Bangla. The following anecdote was provided as an example:

When the cattle get sick, then the doctors prescribe medicines. What happens is that if you don't know English, you won't know when the date of use of a given medicine expires. Again, when I go to the pharmacies, I face some problems for lacking English. I don't have any option other than bring the medicine home which the vendor gives me. I don't know if this is a good medicine or not. Sometimes the vendor gives wrong medicine... there are lots of dangers if one does not know English. (Momin Khan, farmer)

Access to such information is vital for the survival and success of people in rural communities, and one might therefore conclude that English language skills need to be improved in order to fill this need. However, it is not clear why such information is not provided in Bangla, the national language. One answer might be that with literacy rates around 50%, information in written Bangla would not necessarily be accessible to all of the participants in this study. Indeed we noted in our analyses that some participants seemed to conflate English literacy with literacy and numeracy in general, and to perceive of all written code as equally inaccessible. This perception indicates a continuing need to promote access to basic literacy and numeracy, and an insistence on providing essential information in the national language – perhaps in a variety of modes.

This small-scale study provides examples both of how languages are used and valued in communities and how a lack of language skills, especially literacy can perpetuate disadvantage both in terms of economic and social capital. While limited in its scope, the study sheds light on the intersections between various aspects of development; for example language skills and sustainable agriculture. It therefore provides some detail into how

capabilities can be enhanced through language skills, and converted into valued outcomes that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and societies.

### **Conclusion and implications**

Equipped with this more nuanced understanding of the relationship between English language skills and value, I consider how this might better inform development aid to language planning. I do so by returning to the example of EIA. I know from my limited contribution to EIA that the project transformed lives in a number of ways: The adult learning component enabled people around the country to study English affordably through their mobile phones, the Internet, television programmes and print media. The school-based aspect developed a locally appropriate model of teacher development supported through self-study materials delivered in both Bangla and English through low-cost mobile phones. These materials were designed to promote student-centred, communicative language teaching and the improvement of teachers' language competence in a large number of schools around the country. While the sustainability of EIA remains to be seen, project evaluation indicates measured success (Walsh et al, 2013).

As part of the need to demonstrate impact, EIA undertook research into the relationship between English and value. However, this relationship seems obvious in the formal sector and in international companies where English commonly serves as a lingua franca. Those employees working in the formal sector are more likely to have experienced high levels of education and high quality education, enjoying the credentials and networks necessary to achieve such positions in the first place. Such research can have little effect in the field of language planning beyond emboldening the discourses of English as a language of international development that many initiatives rely on. Moreover, these quantitative studies (as well as the large-scale ones) position English language abilities as commodities

primarily of instrumental value (cf. Heller & Duchêne, 2016), and largely fail to reveal the intrinsic and other values of language skills, including languages other than English (e.g. improving health, lowering population growth, political and environmental awareness and engagement, cognitive benefits, social and personal benefits and intercultural communication).

Some insight into the relationship between (English) language skills and broader conceptions of development was gained through the qualitative study reviewed here. This study reveals alignment between community ideologies of English and development aid-funded language planning initiatives for English language education. Perceptions of the value of English are strong, and participants cited examples of the benefits and prestige allotted to those who with skills in the language, as well as the disadvantages and obstacles for those who do not. However, the data also indicate the strong need for language planning and development aid to continue to support literacy and numeracy skills in general, and to provide essential information to communities in languages and modes that they can access.

In terms of informing the funding of language planning initiatives so that they contribute to capability enhancement and social justice, further qualitative research could help us better understand how people working in the formal economy come by their English competence – whether it is through language planning initiatives planned by the state and fostered by development aid, or whether it is more likely to have been acquired through the family’s investment in private tutoring or private education. It would also be instructive to understand better how multilingual skills in local, national and global languages can contribute to the development of capabilities of individuals and communities. This is especially important given the finding that local languages and social multilingualism are also valuable for economic growth at the national level (Arcand & Grin, 2013; Coleman, 2017).

The relationship between English and economic value is complex. It is of utmost importance that this complexity is recognised by development agents and language planners. Such projects should deliver clear and honest messages about the value of English alongside other languages, within certain constraints, avoiding uncritical and simplistic solutions. English should not be held up as a panacea for employability and poverty. How English may be accentuating gaps between the more and less privileged must be considered in further language planning initiatives and public debates about language policy if they are truly to contribute to holistic development. Compensatory interventions are necessary in order to equalise opportunities for the less advantaged in order to work towards changing the larger structures that perpetuate inequality and limit people's opportunities.

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