

12

The role of English in the safety, stability, and resilience of Bangladeshi economic migrants working in the Middle East

Mike Solly, Qumrul Hasan Chowdhury, Elizabeth J. Erling and Philip Seargeant

Introduction

Migration in its various forms is becoming a key driver of opportunity in the 21st century but is also, for many, an experience which can lead to exploitation and vulnerability. A recent area of focus for both humanitarian and educational intervention has understandably been directed towards migration from war zones, particularly from the Middle East. However, vast numbers continue to migrate to the Middle East, in search of work and income to send to families back at home. Bangladesh has long provided many of these migrants. In fact, since 1970 the country has sent around ten million unskilled workers and labourers to markets predominantly in the Middle East, as well as East Asia. Many are semi-literate in their national language (Bangla) and most have either very rudimentary or no real knowledge of languages that would be required in the host countries (e.g. Arabic and English) (Rao and Hossain, 2011).

Drawing on a study conducted in 2013 of returned migrants from one particular village in rural Bangladesh, this chapter examines the language needs of this varied group of temporary workers to the Middle East. It considers language not only as a necessary skill for work, but also as a tool for negotiating and dealing with the threats, sometimes very serious, faced by the participants in the study. The study shows how the lack of linguistic competence in relevant languages increased people's vulnerability, and how the acquisition of such languages, and particularly English, was partially able to promote the protective factors needed to build resilience in the contexts in which the workers found themselves. Although the numbers in the study are small, and the context very particular, the chapter examines why the linguistic needs outlined here, along with the recommendations based upon it, are potentially relevant and applicable to huge numbers of migrant workers who would gain from further communication and language skills to increase their intercultural

competence and, in doing so, decrease their vulnerability to alienation, abuse and trauma.

The notion of resilience for forced and economic migrants

Resilience in this context is understood as how individuals demonstrate 'competence to significant risk exposure' (Smith, 2006:53). This signals a shift away from a concentration on the 'problems and deficits' of individuals, to understanding how people exercise strengths and agency in order to face adverse situations (Wong and Song, 2008:132). The notion of 'resilience' as a means of harnessing protective factors to strengthen an individual in times of hardship and adversity, and of decreasing their vulnerability to the potential outcomes of hardship and adversity, has been part of the discourse in humanitarian interventions for some years. As a result of displaced populations from war and other crises (particularly those related to Syria), organisations such as the British Council are now looking at how the notion of 'resilience' can be applied to the successful acquisition of necessary languages needed by Syrians who have become refugees in neighbouring countries. A recent British Council report recommends language programme interventions for migrants in this context (Capstick and Delaney, 2016), with a specific focus on the particular situation of long-term refugees from the Syria crises. We contend that although the context discussed in this chapter is very different, and that economic migrants crucially have a large element of choice in most (but not all) cases of migration, there are still commonalities around the isolation and potential trauma that can be experienced in the process. The successful provision of appropriate language skills either before or during the period of migration may alleviate the pressures that the migrants may suffer, and so build individual and group resilience, and it is within this context that we approach the issue.

The context and the study

Temporary economic migration from Bangladesh takes place from all over the country, and there are some villages and communities where almost every household has members who are either working overseas or have recently returned. For our study we concentrated on one such village, Kharrah, where data were collected primarily from returnees but also from the current migrant workers who are or were based predominantly in the Middle East. The research was conducted in three stages: the pilot phase, the main study and a follow-up visit. Two Bangladeshi researchers conducted the fieldwork, and a UK-based researcher visited the site and met some of the participants in the pilot stage. The Bangladeshi researchers had support of a local community member in order to recruit participants, mostly through a snowball sampling method. In total, 27 returnee and current migrant workers were interviewed, either in small groups or individually, where they were asked a range of questions about their migration experience. These questions were of a general nature that aimed to elicit language-relevant responses in a flexible way rather than to be explicit that the primary interest was in the role of languages in their experience. The interview data were treated as accounts of truths, facts and beliefs, co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee (Talmy, 2010), and were used to build autobiographical narratives of the participants, and through this to build a picture both individually and historically of the role of language in the migration experience (Pavlenko, 2007).

Ethical sensitivity was exercised throughout the project, particularly in line with local educational and socio-cultural realities and expectations (see Hultgren, et al., 2016). All participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Findings and discussion

The project's findings indicate the presence of anxiety, stress, fear and feelings of vulnerability among most of the migrant workers, relating to a range of economic migration issues across the Middle East. Our analysis also shows that the discourses of anxiety and fear involved with economic migration are also widely prevalent and become a topic of discussion among the returnee and current migrant workers, creating a collective discourse of vulnerability and unease about the process among the community. While many of these fears exist at a local interpersonal level (i.e. they are the specific experiences of individuals and particular events), they are clearly in part the result of broader global economic issues relating to migration whereby the national, cultural and linguistic capital of the

Bangladeshi migrants come into contact with structural power differentials in the context of the Middle East environments to which they travel. This chapter briefly presents the accounts of fear and vulnerability as our participants report them, but also takes particular interest in the role of languages, including English, as a useful tool for dealing with those fears, especially in helping the participants to protect themselves and to build resilience in vulnerable and conflict situations. To this end, we present several areas and aspects of risks and vulnerabilities of the migration experience as reported by the participants, covering a range of issues from preparation for the migration experience to events while working and living in the Middle East.

Pre-departure fear and anxiety

Problematic issues often occur at the pre-departure phase, as the would-be migrants anticipate a tough and ruthless work experience amidst new social, cultural, linguistic and legal milieus in the Middle Eastern countries in which they are to work. Inadequate preparation and the generally low and incompatible educational, professional and linguistic ability for working abroad of most of them intensify their fear and feelings of vulnerability, as can be seen in this extract:

I hoped that I would be able to earn good amount of money. I was worried about language. I was also worried about the agencies, whether they would be able to legitimately take me to the country of my work. (Sobhan)

Many of the migrants have heard anecdotal stories within their village community of workers being cheated by their agents or of being lied to (Afsar, 2009). It is often the case that the pre-departure promises concerning the jobs they will do and the working conditions and salaries they will receive fail to materialise. This further augments pre-departure fears, and most of the migrant workers find that they are emotionally, culturally and linguistically 'at sea' upon departure. This statement by Rahat reflects these sentiments:

I was tremendously afraid before going to Singapore. In the airport, I cried like anything. Even you don't cry like this when your near one dies. [...] people in my locality said that construction work, particularly the concrete steel work under the scorching sun is very difficult. Since I was very young, they said I would die. (Rahat)

Many migrant workers take loans, sometimes at high interest rates, resulting in them spending perhaps the first year or two of their overseas lives having to repay the 'middle men' who arrange their trip. They also often sell land in order to invest in what can be a

high-stakes opportunity for their families' and their economic development (see also Erling, et al., in preparation). Some are travelling on falsified documents, with passports exaggerating or minimising their age, or with visas that may not have been legitimately obtained. All of these pre-departure activities can thus enhance their sense of anxiety.

Vulnerability in travelling to the destination

The research found that the anxiety of the migrant workers often intensified with the journey itself. Travelling to the host country is, for the majority, their first visit to another country, possibly even another region, and almost certainly their first experience of international air travel. Migrants will rarely have received any detailed orientation to help them with this often-difficult journey (even the type of bathroom encountered on a plane is likely to be totally different to any they have encountered before). This disorientation was often reported as adding to a sense of anxiety and stress. The general lack of communication and care by recruiting agents and employers can result in unexpectedly long transits with long waits, often alone, in the host country airport. Moreover, an inability to be able to communicate to authorities in a shared language in these situations can exacerbate the general anxiety. Here, for example, is what one participant in our study reports of his experience travelling to Dubai:

I had been told that I would go in a direct flight to Dubai. But that did not happen. I found that there was seven hours' transit in Malaysia. That was problematic. I had problem with eating foods. I asked a woman in the Malaysian airport in English, 'Where can I eat some food? I have some dirham with me'. The woman replied, 'You can't eat anything with dirham. You have to change the dirham into dollars.' I asked her where I could exchange dirham into dollars. She directed me to the place where I could exchange money. I went to that place and asked the person sitting in the counter, 'I want to change dirham into dollars'. I bought some dollars and after a long time, I could eat some food. Then the plane flew to Pakistan. There was three hours' transit in Pakistan. Finally, the plane flew to Dubai. My agent told me that it would be a direct flight and would take six hours to reach to Dubai. But that did not happen. I felt very bad. (Badol)

In this situation, Badal's ability to communicate in English with a woman at the airport helped him to exchange currency in order to buy food, and thus somewhat alleviate his physical vulnerability. International airports, however, appear to be an area where most of the migrant workers find themselves

less confident, ill-prepared and highly anxious, as they are at the very start of their migration journey. This is also likely to be the first time their own language is not able to help them, and they are linguistically deprived of all contact unless they have some knowledge of other languages. International airports are a domain of lingua franca English and, thus, as in Badol's case, having even basic communication skills in English can be linguistically empowering in allowing them to operate with some degree of informed control and thus lessen anxiety and contribute to protective factors, which in turn can build resilience.

Workplace-related conflict

After arrival at their destination, many of the participants reported workplace-related conflict, strife and misunderstanding, which caused anxiety, frustration and suffering. Often such anxiety was caused by issues such as the discrepancy between the promised and actual job, delayed and/or lower salaries than had been specified, hardship and long hours, mistreatment and, most disturbingly, physical abuse. A general understanding among participants was that a lack of communication skills can be a substantial source of misery and that having the necessary skills in an appropriate language, even at a fairly basic level, can prevent some of the most disturbing causes of stress, and help extricate oneself from vulnerable positions. Afia, a female participant who worked as domestic worker in six Middle Eastern countries, reports:

In Bahrain, I was beaten. For example, they asked for tea. I gave tea leaves. I did not make the tea. She put her hand on my neck and moved me to tell, 'Boil the tea leaves. Make tea'. They told me things in Arabic, I did not know Arabic. There was no other Bangladeshi to help me out. That's how I worked. Sometimes, the children said to me something, but I didn't understand. Then the children knocked me. But you can never have a gloomy face. (Afia)

The data shows that while there were participants who surrendered and suffered when conflict arose, there were others who were able to take at least some control over the situation. The research found that intercultural competence and linguistic ability, primarily in Arabic, but also in English, were useful tools which allowed the migrant workers to translate situations of distress into more favourable situations. This extract from Gofur, reporting on an alarming incident in Saudi Arabia, demonstrates how his knowledge of written English alleviated not only his discomfort and vulnerability, but also those of his fellow workers:

When I used to work at a hotel, the hotel used to break at 3pm. But we all had to wait till 5pm because there was no bus before 5pm. This problem wasn't before. Then whenever our work finished, bus used to be provided. Now since there was no bus, we had to unnecessarily sit down at the basement at this extra time. There were Filipinos and Koreans with us. Then many of the Koreans left the job. The Filipinos used to live in that hotel. So, mostly we the Bangladeshis had the problem. So, I told the authority several times, but the authority did not take our problem seriously. In such condition, I made a draft of a letter in English where I stated the issue. I sent the letter directly to the Saudi authority. Then they said, 'Come, who wrote this?' I replied that I wrote this. Then they called the transport section in front of me and told 'today from now onwards bus will go at due time so that they can go when they need to go'. Then he put his sign in that letter of mine. And on that day, at lunch, we saw 'transport provided again'. All the people then were very happy on me. (Gofur)

In the above statement, conflict arose regarding the lack of provision of a bus service, which required the Bangladeshi workers to wait long after the end of the working day, and this was not resolved even after Gofur verbally reported it several times to the authorities. Gofur's proficiency in English, particularly his ability to write a letter in English, was useful in this case in order to raise the issue at a higher level. Whether this success is due to the symbolic value of English in general, or the written and formal mode of communication, remains an open question, but the linguistic knowledge which Gofur displayed enabled him to make his and his fellow workers' case against the clearly discriminatory action of withdrawing the earlier bus. Having the necessary language skills (written English on this occasion) was able to alleviate the vulnerability of the migrant labour force in this particular case. The case also demonstrates the power differentials between the Saudis, the non-Bangladeshi migrant workers and the Bangladeshi workers. The Saudi authorities paid no attention to the Bangladeshi complaints until a letter was written in English. The Filipinos and the Koreans, meanwhile, had the option of either staying at the same hotel or leaving the job. In the end, it was the Bangladeshis who were left in the most vulnerable situation following the change of bus schedule.

Social anxieties

A significant part of the migrant workers' experiences involved stress and insecurity in their social lives while in the Middle East. This partly comes from the pressing need to send money back home, which requires them to live in austerity in order to save money. Moreover, the fact that workers

need to live without their families and thus cannot receive help or support from them seems, unsurprisingly, to intensify this anxiety. However, the data also showed that this anxiety is, to a considerable extent, triggered by the need to comply with the norms of the societies and cultures in which they are living, and to be able to communicate in the complex multilingual and multicultural economic migration environment of the Middle East. Many of the participants reported that, as migrant workers, they felt deprived of any social or educational capital they may have gained in Bangladesh (through education, experience, or other locally valued actions), and only the ability to communicate in a shared language or understand intercultural differences between other people they interacted with could alleviate the sense of vulnerability this gave rise to. Without these skills the migrant workers seemed to feel powerless to alleviate their suffering. This is how Bilkis, who was employed as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, rather sadly conceptualises the need to work as a migrant worker:

You have to close your hands, make your eyes blind, deaf your ear and make your heart cruel. Then you can work in foreign countries. (Bilkis)

Vulnerability in law and order situations

The participants' narratives also revealed tensions and anxieties concerning the severity of law and order requirements of the countries they worked in. In particular, there was a general underlying anxiety about the need to abide by the strict laws (backed by severe punishments) in some Arab countries. There was a reference, for example, to the threatened forced amputation of limbs for theft when one of the participants was (falsely) accused of a crime and was understandably fearful of this strict sanction. Sometimes, anxiety also arose due to concerns about breaching the legal conditions of visas and work permits. This included for example, fleeing from the malik (employer) or the company where the migrant worker was legally bound to work and often to live, or overstaying the legal visa period. Many of the participants had, at some point, been involved in an encounter with law enforcement, and again their vulnerability to the distress encountered in the face of such a stark power differential between state authority and foreign worker was greatly increased when there was no shared language. All the participants reported that communication skills, predominantly in Arabic, but also in English, were very important to help navigate such situations. Here, for example, is an account of a potentially dangerous situation from Sobhan during his stay in Kuwait:

When I first went there, I used to live beside a Sudanese. He was my first malik. One day he lost

some money and he complained to the local police that the Bangladeshis stole his money. I then just went to Kuwait. I even didn't know the dinar. Police came and arrested me and the other Bangladeshis on accusation of stealing. The Sudanese malik came and he, other Bangladeshis and the police were speaking in Arabic. However, gradually the police released all other Bangladeshis one after another except me. That is the most terrible experience of my life. This can happen in a foreign country when you don't know the language. They were asking me questions in Arabic, but I did not understand anything. It had been only two days that I went to that country. They were saying that I stole 140 dinars. The police also caught my cousin. They did not release my cousin. My cousin was saying to me that the police would cut my wrist on accusation of theft. I said why would they cut my wrist? Where could I keep the money? I am a newcomer. I don't know banks; I don't know roads. I would have given you the money if I stole because you are my brother. The Sudanese person and his father came to me several times and they were asking me why I stole the money. My cousin was saying to them that I was a newcomer. How could I steal the money? Then another senior police officer came. He appeared to know some English. He asked me, '150 dinar, you thief?' I replied, 'no sir, never, I am taking money never, never did.' I also said I didn't know anything about the money. I said very clearly, 'don't know this money, this currency from Kuwait.' By this time, other police officers came. The police officer was very convinced. However, to be sure, they got my fingerprints. Finally, they released me from the accusation of theft. That was a very memorable experience in my life. I could rescue myself because of knowing English. (Sobhan)

In this case, Sobhan's initial failure to communicate in Arabic contributed to the suspicion heaped on of being involved in stealing and this thus increased his vulnerability and fear of being punished. His ability to communicate in basic English, however, worked as a useful linguistic compensation to protect him from the severe prosecution risks that he may have faced.

Conclusion and recommendations

Although the experiences of the participants in this study are varied, with some feeling a net benefit from the migration and others feeling a net loss, all of them expressed a sense of having experienced alienation and isolation at times due to a feeling of vulnerability. Some of the reported cases were highly disturbing and potentially likely to result in traumatic states. Given these findings, there are a number of interventions that could help build protective factors needed to alleviate this vulnerability. Having pre-departure training about their rights with agents and

as guest workers, as well as in understanding contracts, would greatly help to reduce their vulnerability. In addition to this, however, is the need for courses in intercultural understanding, not only about the very different norms that exist in Middle Eastern societies, but also those of the cultures of the people they will share their working and home lives with, especially those from the Philippines, or other South Asian societies.

All of the participants stressed the importance of a knowledge of appropriate languages to help deal with the situations in which they found themselves, and a number told stories of how a knowledge of another language (particularly Arabic and English) was key in helping to improve their situation, or even, in some cases, to remove them from potentially harmful situations. The acquisition of appropriate languages thus increases protective factors and helps build resilience in contexts such as these.

There is a role here for both pre-departure courses (ideally provided by the companies arranging the migrant's overseas appointments as a condition of appointment) and also for the provision of in-country language and culture courses. We can see from the examples above that the kind of language needed (ideally, in these cases, in both Arabic and English) is, crucially, around key areas such as:

- Work-related vocabulary and phrases
- Language of complaint and negotiation
- Language related to health and wellbeing
- Language of social interaction
- Written language for corresponding

The study also found that the levels of education and literacy of the migrant workers, even in their home language, were generally very low, with most of them having stopped formal education at primary level. Any materials would, therefore, need to reflect a range of literacy skills. One possible way of addressing this, and providing materials that could be easily available in multiple languages, is by providing materials through the medium of the mobile phone, which seem to be ubiquitous among the migrants we spoke to. This could be done in a similar way to the Mediated Authentic Video that was produced in the English in Action project in Bangladesh using video and audio materials preloaded onto SD cards and then inserted into mobile phones (see <http://eiabd.com/>). These materials could demonstrate the language needed for particular situations to the migrant workers. In the case of English in Action, this was for use with English teachers, but the methodology is easily transferrable to the linguistic needs of migrant workers.

The report on Language for Resilience for the British Council mentioned in the introduction, and which focuses on the language needs of Syrian refugees in countries that neighbour Syria (Capstick and Delaney, 2016), includes themes that are common to the many migrants who are forced to escape low levels of employment in their home countries in order to alleviate their own and their family's poverty. These include the role that appropriate languages can play in being able to access training and employment (as well as educational) opportunities while in the host countries, and also the importance of being able to learn together with people from other cultures to help foster intercultural understanding and create safe spaces in classrooms to be able to meet others and tell stories. The provision of both pre-departure and in-country language courses, delivered both face-to-face and digitally could be a key resource in diminishing the vulnerability that all migrants can feel, and help build their resilience as individuals and as migrant communities.

References

- Afsar, R (2009) Unravelling the vicious cycle of recruitment: Labour migration from Bangladesh to the Gulf States. International Labour Office (ILO) Working Paper 63.
- Capstick, C and Delaney, M (2016) Language for Resilience, British Council. Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/language-for-resilience-report-en.pdf>
- Erling, EJ, Seargeant, P, Solly, M, Chowdhury, QH and Rahman, S (2015) English for economic development: A case study of migrant workers from Bangladesh. ELTRP Report, British Council. Available online at: <https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/research-publications/research-papers/english-economic-development-case-study-migrant-workers-bangladesh>
- Erling, EJ, Seargeant, P, Chowdhury, QH and Solly, M (in preparation) Perceived “advantages” of language skills in economic migration: A Bangladeshi case study.
- Hultgren, AC, Erling, EJ and Chowdhury, QH (2016) ‘Ethics in language and identity research’, in Preece, S (ed) *Routledge Handbook of language and identity* (pp. 257–270). London: Routledge.
- Pavlenko, A (2007) Autobiographic narratives as data in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(2), 163–188.
- Rao, N and Hossain, MI (2011) Confronting poverty and educational inequalities: Madrasas as a strategy for contesting dominant literacy in rural Bangladesh.

International Journal of Educational Development 31, 623-633.

Smith, EJ (2006) The strength-based counseling model. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 34, 13–79.

Talmy, S (2010) Qualitative interviews in applied linguistics: From research instrument to social practice. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, (30)128–148.

Wong, DFK and Song, HX (2008) The resilience of migrant workers in Shanghai China: the roles of migration stress and meaning of migration. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 54(2), 131-143.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the British Council English Language Teaching Research Partnership Awards for funding this research, Dr. Sayeedur Rahman for supporting the fieldwork, and all of the participants for sharing their time and insights with us.