English in rural Bangladesh

ELIZABETH J. ERLING, PHILIP SEARGEANT AND MIKE SOLLY

How is language education perceived as a resource for development in rural communities?

Introduction

English's elevated status within a global economy of languages means that English-language education is increasingly promoted in international development initiatives in countries such as Bangladesh. This is partly due to a growing conviction that English is able to play an important role in helping people participate in global economic markets from which they have previously been excluded (Seargeant & Erling, 2011). Despite the strong associations made between English-language ability and development, there is at present only limited evidence showing a causal relationship between the two (Erling, forthcoming), while a complex of other issues surrounding the cultural politics of the language also play a role in the social implications of its promotion in such contexts. The aim of this article is to examine how English is perceived in rural Bangladesh by the people at whom such international development programmes are targeted. A broad assumption of such programmes is that English is a positive and, in some sense, necessary resource for development. The article investigates whether this matches the perception of those at whom such projects are aimed, and what it is that these communities feel the language can offer both in practical and in socio-cultural terms for the developmental challenges they face. In order to examine these questions the article draws on results from an ethnographical survey of two rural areas in Bangladesh which investigated the attitudes and aspirations of local community members to the potential impact of English-language education on their social prospects and cultural identities.

English and international development in Bangladesh

The role of English has been a contentious issue in many developing (and other) countries for more than a century (Erling & Seargeant, 2013), but since the early 1990s several governments around the world have been reassessing the place of the language in their education systems in response to its emergence as the pre-eminent international lingua franca. There is now a common perception in many contexts that English can provide access to both economic and social development, and the rise of this view has come about at the same time as a shift in emphasis in approaches to development: a move from seeing development outcomes in purely economic terms, to seeing them in terms of a more general improvement in people's lives, aspirations and opportunities (Vavrus, 2002; Tembe & Norton, 2011; Seargeant & Erling, 2013). All this has, in recent years, led governments and development agencies to invest in programmes that promote the learning and teaching of English as a part of a development agenda.

In general, Bangladeshis (and particularly rural Bangladeshis) are still a long way from acquiring the marketable skills that have been enjoyed for some time by people from neighbouring India, particularly in terms of working in international industries and business processes such as the call centre trade (Rassool, 2013). This has been attributed in part to the lack of English competence among its population (see, for example, Khan, 2010). Due to this, there has, since the 1990s, been a renewed interest in the role of English in Bangladesh's economic development, and several educational initiatives have sought to improve English learning across the country, for example the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), which ran from 1997 to 2008, and English in Action (EIA), sponsored by the UK Department of International Development, which is scheduled to run from 2008 to 2017. EIA's stated goal is to significantly

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increase the number of people 'able to communicate in English to levels that will enable them to participate fully in economic and social activities and opportunities' (EIA, 2010). Baseline studies conducted for the project found that 84% of the participants surveyed wished to learn the language, while 87% believed it would help them earn more money (EIA, 2009). There is, then, evidence of a strong general desire from the populations of the targeted communities to learn English, along with a firm belief that the acquisition of such learning, if successful, will lead to increased economic development. However, the data from these baseline studies does not provide any elucidation on the purposes for which members of rural communities want to learn the language, nor how they feel the presence of English has an impact on local social and cultural identities. It is within this context that the current research surveys attitudes towards English in order to build up a more nuanced picture of the associations that adhere to the language, as well as the implications these have for the way people relate to it and to the role it does and can play in their everyday lives.

ELIZABETH J. ERLING is a Lecturer in English Language Teaching at the Open University. She is author of The Role of English in Skills Development in South Asia *(published by the British Council) and co-editor of* English and Development*. She was principal investigator for two British Council research projects: 'Learning English for economic development: A case study of migrant workers from rural Bangladesh' and 'English as a language for international development in rural Bangladesh'. Email: elizabeth.erling@open.ac.uk*

PHILIP SEARGEANT is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at The Open University. He is author of The Idea of English in Japan *and* Exploring World Englishes*, and editor of* English in Japan in the Era of Globalization*,* English and Development *(with Elizabeth J. Erling) and* The Language of Social Media *(with Caroline Tagg). Email: philip.seargeant@open.ac.uk*

MIKE SOLLY is Senior Lecturer in Education at the Open University. He has made key contributions to the English in Action project in Bangladesh, leading the work in secondary schools and with a particular expertise in mediated video on mobile phones. Most recently he has pursued a research interest in attitudes to English in rural communities, and linked to this, is working on the linguistic and other needs of migrant workers in the Middle East. Email: Mike.solly@open.ac.uk

The context of rural Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a South Asian country with a population of approximately 152.5 million (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011). It is a mainly rural nation, with, at present, up to 75% of the total population involved in farming (Gunaratne, 2000: 41). It is a country marked by acute poverty, with a lack of sustainable socioeconomic infrastructures and a low literacy rate (52.7% for women and 59.4% for men). Although several development initiatives have taken place at both governmental and non-governmental levels, the country still ranks 146th out of 187 in the UNDP Human Development Index and 30% of the population live below the international poverty line (UNDP, 2013; World Bank, 2013a, b).

Language politics have played a very important part in the history of the country. The foundation of the nation state is inextricably bound with the national language in a way few other nations are in that Bangladesh was created from the violent struggles which catalysed around the movement for the recognition of Bangla as the official language (Hamid & Erling, forthcoming). Bangla thus acts as a strong marker of secular national identity because of the nation-binding role it had in the pre-independence era, and since independence in 1971 the country has continued to attach great importance to the language (Thompson, 2007). The vast majority of the population (85%) are classified as speakers of the national language (Lewis, 2009), but there is also a significant number of minority variety speakers, particularly in rural areas and among Bangladesh's ethnic minorities (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007: 243).

English has continually had a presence in the country due to British colonial history in the area and the language's subsequent emergence as a

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global force with a high instrumental value in various domains (Imam, 2005). The status of English in the country can either be characterised as that of a second or foreign language, depending on the domains in which it is encountered (Kachru, 1994). Crystal (2003: 62) estimated that at the turn of the 21st century there were approximately 3,500,000 English speakers in Bangladesh, i.e. approximately 2.5% of the total population. It is a compulsory academic subject from primary to higher secondary level and is required for entry into higher education (Rahman, 2005). But unlike in other South Asian countries, English does not fulfil a *lingua franca* function within society (Banu & Sussex, 2001).

The country is presently aiming to promote a shift in its economic structure from agriculture to manufacturing and to deepen integration with global markets (World Bank, 2013a). Such developments call for a sound proficiency in English (Rahman, 2005). People who live in rural areas under or around the poverty line are likely to find such requirements particularly challenging due to the poor quality and limitations of education (including English teaching) in such areas (cf. Graddol, 2010).

The two rural areas that this study focuses upon are Toke and Shak Char. Toke, with a population of 37,669, is situated in the middle-eastern part of Bangladesh, 80 kilometres away from the capital city Dhaka. Shak Char is even more remote; 198 kilometres from Dhaka, it is situated in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh and has a population of 50,349 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011). There is very little industry in either of these areas and both economies are dependent on agriculture. In both places there is acute underdevelopment, a lack of infrastructure and poor health and sanitation facilities. In addition, the proximity of Shak Char to the River Meghna makes it highly vulnerable to natural disasters such as cyclones and floods, which has a serious impact on farming.

In summary, the context of these areas is one of real hardship for the inhabitants. There is a lack of stability in terms of work, due both to global economics (dependency on global economic flows meaning industry is informal/infrequent) and insufficient infrastructure combined with vulnerability to environmental problems and isolation. As noted above, this is also a context where English is not needed for *lingua franca* purposes as the nation is comparatively linguistically homogeneous. Despite this, as our data will show, there is a very strong interest in English, and the question the research therefore sets out to address is why people feel a need for English, and what they consider it can contribute to their lives.

The research into this question adopted an ethnographically based methodology, surveying a cross-section of the two societies in order to offer a picture of the status of English within these communities. In December 2010, two male Bangladeshi researchers conducted semi-structured interviews during an extended field visit of five days in each site, where they also recorded their insights on the geographic, socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic specifics of the local communities.

The interviews were structured around topics which included participants' perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of education in general, towards the acquisition of English in particular, and towards the relationship of education and English language knowledge to both individual and community development as well as to issues such as local language politics and cultural identity. The interviews were conducted in Bangla and then transcribed and translated into English by the researchers. These translations have been left mainly unaltered, thus reflecting local sociolects of English. The interviews were analysed by means of a qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2006).

In total, 28 people were interviewed, 23 male and 5 female participants with an age range of 22 to 62. These participants were chosen in order to represent a broad cross-section of people in terms of the following variables: profession, age, social class, gender and religion. They included representatives from formal and educated professions such as banker, college teacher, politician and religious leader to informal and self-employed workers such as barber, fisherman, farmer, cleaner and rickshaw driver. While we aimed to have an equal representation of male and female participants in the data, this proved to be a considerable challenge for the researchers due to cultural issues. It transpired that women generally prefer not to interact with strangers in rural communities of this sort. In order to respect the local culture, all interviews with female participants were organised in their home environments and took place in the presence of a male adult family member. Interviews for the rest of the (male) participants were conducted in their place of work.

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. Informed consent for use of the data was confirmed

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orally by all participants, and pseudonyms have been used to protect their anonymity. The low education and income levels of the participants forced us to face some challenging ethical considerations in terms of the research process employed. For example, rickshaw-pullers, fishermen and cleaners lost out on potentially significant income during the time in which the interview took place. Thus, it seemed unethical not to give them a small token of appreciation. And yet we aimed to ensure that such tokens did not distort the research or give people false expectations about the result of taking part in the research. In the end, food items were chosen as appropriate tokens.

Further issues revolved around the fact that the field researchers are both highly educated university employees, living in the capital city of Dhaka, and have high levels of competence in English. While they both have familiarity with and personal connections to the rural contexts they visited, it is very likely that they were viewed by people within the communities they were researching as outsiders with a different social and economic standing. In interpreting the data, therefore, this issue, and the implications it may have had on the information that the participants provided, needs to be taken into account.

Research findings

As was intimated above, one of the broadest and most notable findings is that English was almost universally seen among the cohort as being related to the global knowledge economy and thus important for employment prospects, both in the local area and elsewhere. This view was overwhelmingly predominant, regardless of the location or occupation of the participant. The perception was that knowledge of English offers access to global systems, including technology, and better employment opportunities both home and abroad. Even in those professions where some people voiced doubts about the usefulness of English (e.g. farming), there was still an expressed desire to learn the language, for practical or other reasons.

The purposes for which people wanted to speak English can be broadly characterised as falling into two categories: the first related to specific functional needs and the second to how it operates as an index of social status. The functional purposes that knowledge of the language serves include being able to access information for specific jobs which, due to global manufacturing and distribution patterns, is now provided solely in English rather than in the local language. This includes instructions on the pesticides used in farming, as well as the interfaces for various technologies such as mobile phones. Given the importance of this information for people's livelihoods, access to some form of English competence (be it one's own knowledge or contact with someone else who has this ability) was seen as a critical issue for many.

The relationship between the English language and perceived social status, as well as the esteem and value conferred by the community that was understood to come with skills in using English, emerged as an equally prominent theme in the interviewees' discourse. Time and again in their responses, participants brought up the idea that knowledge of English leads to enhanced social status, and for this reason was a desired attribute. This was often related to a complex of associations between the knowledge of the language and people's social history and identity. For example, professions such as teachers and doctors require one to have a high level of education, might involve some travel abroad and usually involve engaging with particular social circles. Sumon Miah, a rickshaw puller in Toke, was of the opinion that:

> Someone who knows English and does teaching in a school gets respect from people. A doctor gets respect from people and it is because he could become doctor as he knows good English. Again, someone who lives abroad and knows English gets respect from people as they live abroad. . . . People who know English can hang out with good people, can talk worthy and behave well with people. This gives them special respect.

While English was primarily associated with education, there was also the impression that some knowledge of English can enhance the social status of even the educationally disadvantaged, providing, in a sense, 'a short cut' to a higher social standing:

> So, it happens that someone who is not that educated, but knows English will be considered as educated in the civilised society. (Ranu Islam, College teacher, Toke)

In a fascinating and revealing piece of personal testimony given by the uneducated social leader in Shak Char, Minhaz Udiin, we hear how he uses his knowledge of English to create an esteemed identity for himself, despite the fact that his level of education is quite low:

> Minhaz Udiin: Sometimes, in some contexts, I prefer to mix Bangla and English. I feel good to do that.

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Researcher: Why do you like that? Do you think that people give you more respect if you do that?

Minhaz Udiin: I revealed you very frankly about my educational qualification. Now, in other places people can't find out my educational qualification by talking with me.

Researcher: So, as you speak some English, people don't really think that you did not study much, right?

Minhaz Udiin: Yes. How would someone know about my educational qualifications? He hasn't taken any interview with me like you.

Several people also valued English and had high aspirations for the power it has to make their children's lives better and offer them opportunities that they themselves did not have:

> I have kept an English teacher for them. I make my children learn from anyone who knows something about English. If they can learn a bit now, then in higher classes there will not be any problem for them. In this way I am planning their studies. . . . If English is known to them then there will not be any problem for them. From every aspect they will be alright, they will not face any problem anyway. They will not face any problem like mine. (Monohora Rani, Housewife, Shak Char)

Respondents who have a family member who speaks English are clearly very proud of this and feel they have benefited from the reflected esteem that the relative has gained, particularly because of the associations of the language with numeracy and access to technology. For example, Devika, a cleaner in Shak Char, mentions that she is proud of her daughter because she speaks English and because she is 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?' . . . when someone falls in trouble and visits a doctor, she comes to my daughter with the prescription and says, 'can you please see when I should have which medicine?' (Devika, Cleaner, Shak Char)

This example demonstrates how some knowledge of English and the ability to help others perform practical tasks through this knowledge is perceived to earn the respect of the community. The informants mentioned that because there is certain important information that is only available in English (e.g. guidance for use of medicines and pesticides), a lack of English knowledge means people become reliant on those with English knowledge to help them with various essential tasks, and that this can diminish their social standing and self-esteem:

> Suppose someone has a poultry business. Lots of information on poultry medicine is written in English. If he can read and understand this by himself, he would not have to ask for someone's help . . . 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, Toke)

Without English, people cannot access the sort of information that they need to successfully run their businesses, and they are blocked from positions of power and prestige. 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 provide them with a prestigious position in the community from which they could help others.

There were occasional counter opinions to this discourse, showing an understanding of social status being influenced by other factors such as wealth, social standing and family background. This can be seen in excerpts like the following:

> There is no relation of language with getting honour or not. One might have much wealth, but might not have value. Whether a person will get value or not depends on one's behaviours. If a person is a good human being and his behaviour is nice, then he will get respect from people. It does not have any relation with knowing a language or not. (Harun Khan, Chairman, Shak Char)

However, the overwhelming majority view was that knowing English accorded social status and enhanced standing in the community, and while there may be other factors at play here too, a lack of English was seen as a distinct social disadvantage.

Conclusion

In our survey knowledge of English was associated with education in general, and often a good education, with higher level professions, and with providing a service to the community. For those reasons, many of the participants wish they had better skills

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in English and they make every effort to see that their children have opportunities to learn the language. However, in some cases, knowledge of English was unrealistically perceived as a general panacea that can make people's lives better by enhancing their livelihood and standing the community. Excerpts such as the one from Devika, the cleaner, for example, may reflect unrealistic expectations of English, and not pay tribute to other factors that influence social status (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, economic status, etc.).

Similarly, the association of high status and travel abroad expressed by Sumon Miah, the rickshaw puller, may reflect a lack of awareness of the realities of many migrants from Bangladesh. For example the Bangladeshi community in East London are the UK's poorest and least healthy community (Chouhan *et al*., 2011). What underlies all the beliefs expressed in this context is the role that English plays in the global knowledge economy, where it is the *lingua franca* for transnational corporations such as the pharmaceutical firms and is also used as part of a gate-keeping process for many forms of education.

What is noticeable throughout is the lack of criticality in the responses. At this grassroots level, English is linked to larger aspirational discourses, but instances of the impact of the complexities of its relationship with hegemonic geopolitical structures are not articulated by the participants in the study. What these attitudes reflect is a strong belief in the power of English (given current language geopolitics) and a desire to be one of the many who speak the language for reasons of practicality and prestige. Thus demands for the language are likely to be quite high, and programmes to enhance or expand English language teaching are likely to be met without opposition. People may even be willing to invest significantly in English language education, making sacrifices for their children's education and putting it before other resources, which may also be (more) needed in such contexts. Therefore, in terms of practicalities, these findings suggest a need for development programmes in contexts such as this to be aware of these attitudes so that they can both manage expectations and focus on specific, local purposes. In this way they could both enhance opportunities for economic and social development in rural areas, while providing the circumstances for people to sustain and promote local concerns and values. ■

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