



**English and
Employability, Mobility
and Development**

an auto-ethnographic
exploration

THE DHAKA SYMPOSIUM ON

**ACCESS
POINTS AND
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PATHWAYS**

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Introduction

Language and development constitutes an important area in language studies and education (Coleman, 2010; Erling, 2014; Erling & Seargeant, 2013). It is related to the field of economics of language (Grin, 2001, 2003, 2014; Marschak, 1965) and is underpinned by education and development, educational economics and human capital theory (Harber, 2014; Zhang & Grenier, 2013). Although no specific language is implied in the term “language and development”, English has become a default choice. The instrumental value of English, particularly in relation to education and employment, motivated segments of the colonised communities in Asia and Africa to engage with English during British colonial rule. But the emergence of language and development as a field can be located in the post-World War II period when the development and modernisation of decolonised nations in Asia and Africa led to addressing their “language problems” and selecting non-local languages of wider communications (often English) as official languages (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). The role of English in the life of individuals and communities within and across national borders has reached its climax in the contemporary globalised world where the language has emerged as a global lingua franca and a driving force for globalisation. As a preeminent language of science, technology, knowledge and economy in late capitalism, English is taught and learnt in almost all education systems in the world. The current estimate of over one billion people learning and using English, which far exceeds the number of people who speak English as a first language, points to the material significance of the language and the extent of individual and social desire for English across the world.

While the demand for English intensifies globally largely due to its material potential (Hamid, 2015), establishing the cause-and-effect relationship between English and material outcomes based on empirical evidence has presented a challenge for the field (Erling, 2014). This is despite the growing body of work on language and development. The biennial language and development conference held since 1993 and the subsequent publications have made an important contribution to the literature. Similarly, considerable research has been undertaken on the economics of language initially in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s and later in other parts of the developed world to explore economic returns to language and language proficiency (Grin, 2014; Chiswick & Miller, 2002; Zhang & Grenier, 2013). Much of the current body of work has explored the relationship of English proficiency with employability, wage differences and other labour market outcomes (see Erling, 2014). This research has been informed by an econometric perspective that has measured the effect of English proficiency on selected outcome variables usually controlling the mediating and confounding factors (e.g., Aslam, Bari & Kingdon, 2012; Azam, Chin & Prakash, 2013). While this research is becoming sophisticated with the possibility of utilising empirical data being made available through various sources, this database is still modest, particularly in the developing world (Erling, 2014). Moreover, this kind of correlational research is fraught with conceptual and methodological issues including the definition of development, for example, and the measurement of English proficiency. Furthermore, development— or even a specific outcome such as employability— is the result of a wide range of factors. No matter how inclusive statistical models are, we may not be fully confident about measuring the true effects of English proficiency—a single albeit crucial variable— on the outcomes. Therefore, the current state of knowledge in this area, based on the limited available evidence, can be summed up as



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complex and inconclusive at best (Erling, 2014). If the aim of this research is to establish causality, this is far from having been achieved, however desirable that aim is.

Parallel to quantitative research informed by the economics of language, there has been qualitative research that has explored relationships between English proficiency and various outcomes such as participation in the labour market (Barsoum, 2014; Erling, Hamid & Seargeant, 2013); social and economic wellbeing (e.g., Chowdurhy, 2013); English and empowerment (Ahsan et al, 2009; Sandhu, 2010); and integration into migrant societies (Colic-Peisker, 2009). This research complements econometric studies by presenting a holistic, rather than a fragmented, view of the complex relationships between English and economic outcomes. One major criticism of this research is its reliance of perception data, which may not contribute to understanding the causality in the absence of empirical basis. Nevertheless, understanding material outcomes of English based on perceptions is important because the desire for English and its teaching and learning, whether at the individual or societal level, is motivated by the perceived rather than the proven benefits (Hamid, 2015). Increasingly,

the globalised world is becoming complex and competitive and is being dominated by uncertainty. English, among a few other things including technology, is taken by individuals and communities as a means to navigate this global uncertainty and to drive away the fear of being missed out from the global competition for opportunities.

Continuing in this qualitative research strategy, in this paper I seek to generate insights into the relationship between English and aspects of development by drawing on my own life and lived experience. The auto-ethnographic method helps me to explore my experience of moving across places in the world — from a remote village to the capital city in Bangladesh and then to Australia — in search of education, employment and economic security. This retrospective self-observation and analysis facilitates an understanding of the role of English in different events of my life at different stages. If there is any value in this single case, which is not a case of “self-worship and arrogance” (Fung, 2014), it lies in explicating the complex relationship between English and developmental outcomes at an individual level from the individual’s own perspective.



Auto-ethnography and language and individual mobility

Auto-ethnography, which constitutes the interface of autobiography and ethnography, is an approach to research that utilises the researcher's own life and experience, either exclusively or in combination with other data sources, to understand the relationship between self, other and culture (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2009; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). The subjective world of the researcher is drawn upon to understand a particular culture, discipline or phenomenon (Sparks, 2009). In auto-ethnography, while there is often an emphasis on the aesthetic, emotional and therapeutic aspects of self-representation, giving rise to what is called "evocative auto-ethnography", there is also a trend towards "analytical auto-ethnography" which emphasises observation, reflexivity and analysis in reconstructing the personal and experiential material as credible evidence for understanding the culture or phenomenon in question (Anderson, 2006). For instance, Canagarajah (2012) and Fung (2014) have used auto-ethnography to document the journey of professionalisation and transnational identity respectively. Along the same lines, I utilise this method for an understanding of the role of English at different stages of my life. As a case my lived experience is important because it exemplifies mobility in the sense of both crossing the boundary of social class and migrating to a developed country from a low-income society in which English has played a key role. Given the limited space, I do not have a choice but to present only "selected lived experiences" (Fung, 2014, p. 3), which I consider "epiphanies" or "remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life" (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 2).

Turning an auto-ethnographic eye to English and lived experiences

I was born into an impoverished family in a remote corner of Bangladesh in which there was no sign of the literate world. From this constricting social origin, I was able to attend the best university in the country and study English. At the end of my studies I was appointed a lecturer in the same institution. I received Australian Government scholarship for postgraduate studies in English language teaching. Later on I obtained PhD from one of the large universities in Australia at the end of which I was offered an academic position in 2010. As I previously indicated, English played a critical role in many of these events in my long journey towards a fulfilling career.

My early schooling began in a rehabilitation centre in the locality which was funded by a Swiss-based organisation called Terre Des Hommes (see Hamid, 2010a). The school followed a customised, narrowed curriculum which placed extra emphasis on the English language. As a child, I developed special liking for English which was used by the majority of officials for written communication and for their interaction with foreigners who would often visit the centre. Upon completing an equivalent of Grade 8 from this school, I was admitted into a local secondary school. Given my earlier experience in English, I enjoyed the English curriculum for Grade 9- 12 which was the least challenging subject to me. I can recollect a simple but

interesting incident in my Grade 9 class which shows the value given to English in this rural context. One day the headmaster gave a sentence-level translation task from Bangla into English to the class. He promised that whoever performed the task correctly would have his tuition fees fully waived. Of all students in the class, I was able to do it partially correctly and I had half of my school fees waived.

English proficiency, particularly in writing, helped me to get admitted into the English Department of the University of Dhaka for undergraduate studies in English literature. Although this study was quite challenging given my inadequate cultural capital and limited knowledge of the world, the study of English helped me in other important ways. As a student at the university, I had to earn my living and educational expenses. Being a student of English, it was relatively easy for me to land jobs as home tutors for English. I taught students privately for the entire period of my student life in Dhaka to manage my own living and to support my family and a younger sibling who was studying in a medical college at that time. My identity as a student of English at this university was particularly helpful in landing a part-time teaching job in a tutorial centre towards the end of my MA studies. This identity compensated for my limited social connections and family support in the big city.

At the end of my studies at the University, I was recruited as a lecturer in the Department of English to teach English to first year undergraduate students. Although paradoxical, this recruitment for teaching English at the university was based almost exclusively on the academic results of MA examination, without any consideration of English language proficiency. A few months after joining the university, I applied for AusAID scholarship for the study of language teaching qualification. My success in this scholarship bid can be attributed to English proficiency because I had to take the IELTS test and the test score played a key role in the selection process.

However, there were moments when I regretted having studied English because obtaining first class in BA and MA exams in English was very difficult in Bangladesh, even though it was relatively easy in many other fields in humanities and social sciences. This level of achievement is required for accessing certain privileges such as academic jobs and scholarships abroad allocated by government agencies. For instance, the first class was a requirement for the prestigious Commonwealth Scholarship for PhD studies which I was not qualified to apply for because I did not have a first class in my BA. However, I was lucky to obtain scholarship support from the University of Dhaka and the University of Queensland for my PhD. For academic positions in Western universities, although those speaking English as a second language are required to have good command of academic English and communication skills, English proficiency itself has a limited role. Much depends on one's academic profile, research experience and publication records. So, it can be argued that English proficiency is taken as a given and the outcome may depend on the other criteria.

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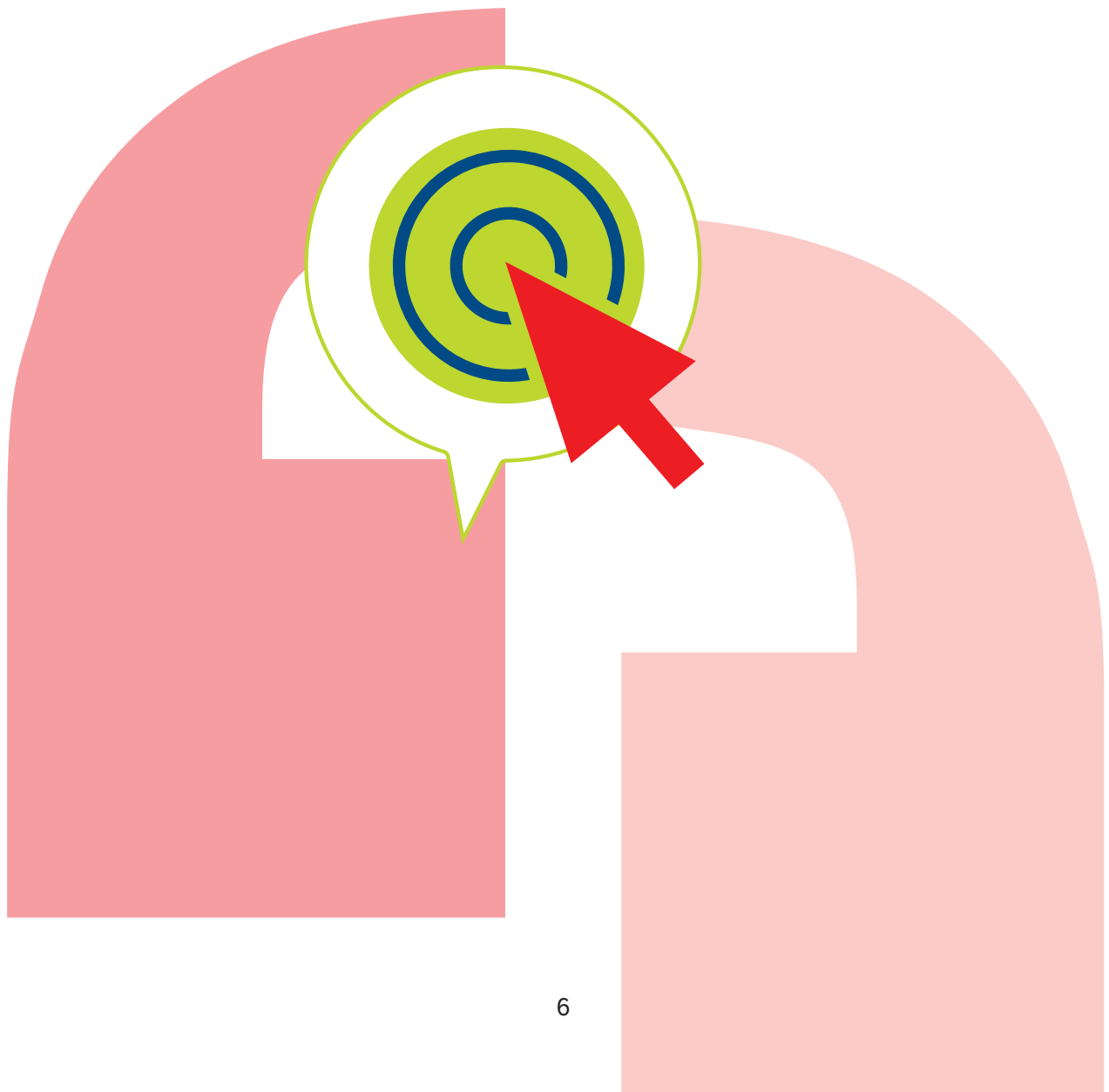
Discussion and conclusion

Space does not permit a detailed exploration of the connections between English and the key events of my life. However, based on my lived experiences as outlined above, several points can be made. At a general level, my association with English helped me to move forward in the journey of life from a remote location in Bangladesh to a cosmopolitan city in Australia, from a humble origin to a decent academic career in one of the high-ranked universities in the world. While the role of English can be seen more clearly in some events of my life, this role was less obvious or perhaps only distantly related, to other situations. However, what is to be noted is the situated and context-specific nature of the relationship between English and developmental outcomes. English interacts with other factors and the nature of this interaction and the importance of English in relation to other factors may vary across individuals and contexts. A more critical point to note is that it is not necessarily English proficiency in an abstract or empirically verified sense that is linked to outcomes; rather, it is the social perception of one's ability to use English or one's connection with an English-related institution that may play a role in achieving material outcomes. For instance, except for the AusAID scholarship application, I did not have to provide evidence of my competence in English for employment purposes. For the tutoring jobs—informal but no less critical in my life—it was sufficient for the employers to know that I was a student of English at the University of Dhaka. For the academic position at the University of Dhaka, the most important consideration was academic achievement. This achievement implied very high level of proficiency in English which is not necessarily the case.

In the context of Bangladesh, the role of English in employment significantly varies between the public and the private sectors. Given the dominance of neoliberal principles, English has received more emphasis in the latter than in the former (Hamid & Baldauf, 2014). However, regardless of the sector, the nature of the employment, the level of expertise and specialisation and the recruitment process ascertain the weight of English proficiency in the selection criteria. For instance, entry level graduate positions in the public and private sectors (e.g., banks) may include English as one of the selection criteria. However, the measure of English proficiency that is used in the competitive recruitment examination may only be distantly related to English proficiency in the sense the term is commonly understood. The kind of English included in the recruitment process does not aim to select the best candidate based on English proficiency; this mainly serves as a mechanism for excluding people in a situation where thousands of job-seekers may compete with one another for a limited number of positions. This use of English as a screening measure may not be problematic because the requirement of English for many jobs is a matter of perception, rather than the outcome of job analysis (see Erling, Hamid & Seargeant, 2013).

Based on my experience and understanding, English indeed had a critical role in my individual mobility and socioeconomic development. In many ways my extended family has received some benefits of my financial independence. Nevertheless, there may be questions about the extent to which this English-mediated development model can contribute to community and social development in Bangladesh. From a critical angle, English can be seen to have paradoxical relationship with development. Development is needed particularly in rural and remote communities in Bangladesh and other developing societies. English may play a role in

the development of these communities by contributing to human capital development as targeted by recent English language policies in Bangladesh (Hamid, 2010b). However, it is to be noted that learning English in such locations may actually force people to leave their communities and migrate to cities and foreign countries in search of employment. So, English-mediated mobility can also be called displacement from one's own community. While the community may receive remittance from these dislocated people, there may be little scope for its social transformation in the absence of educated and entrepreneurial individuals being relocated to other places for employment. The dependence of the community on the mercy of remittance-senders from faraway places may not accelerate the process of change and development in these communities.



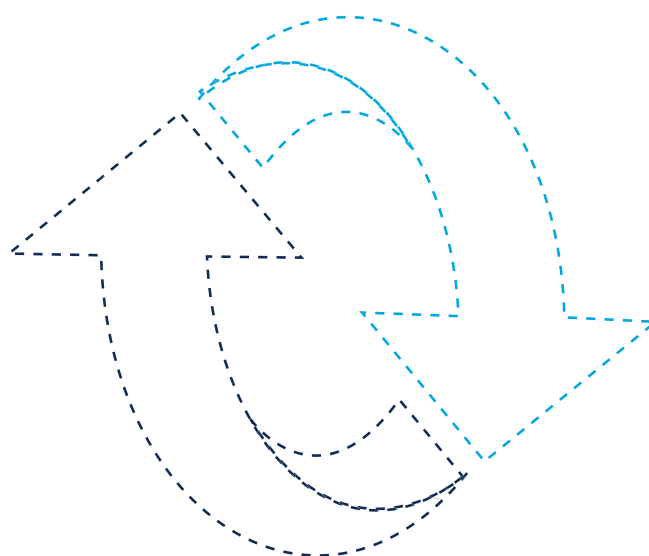
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