The Open
University

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

Demonstrating the quality of learner's experience and engagement: issues in constructing effective evaluation approaches on the English in Action Project, Bangladesh

Conference or Workshop Item

oro.open.ac.uk

Demonstrating the Quality of Learner's Experience and Engagement: Issues in Constructing Effective Evaluation Approaches on the English in Action Project, Bangladesh.

Theme: Social Justice – Scaling up Quality Education for All

Adrian Kirkwood [1] & Jan Rae [2]
[1] Institute of Educational Technology and [2] Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, UK
(Contact: j.l.rae@open.ac.uk)

Introduction

The purpose of the DfID English in Action Project (EIA) currently running in Bangladesh is to 'increase significantly the number of people able to communicate in English, to levels that enable them to participate fully in economic and social activities and opportunities' (EIA, 2008). Supported open learning initiatives will employ media and technologies to supplement and enhance the learning and teaching of communicative English among school students, teachers and adults throughout Bangladesh. The comprehensive programme of research, monitoring and evaluation activities that accompany the project will demonstrate evidence of success and lessons learned from initiatives over the lifetime of the project, scheduled to complete in 2017.

This paper focuses on detailing distinctive ways in which 'success' should be articulated, arguing that both qualitative and quantitative approaches are required in order to fully understand the outcomes of the Project. It highlights the need for a wide range of stakeholders to engage with, examine and fully comprehend the extent to which quality outcomes from the project initiatives have potentially touched and impacted upon individual lives.

Discussion of evidence of 'success' will also reveal how the appropriate requirements for a set of purposive project-wide Baseline Studies were completed before any major project initiatives were launched. They demonstrate the pre-project situation relating to (a) the teaching and learning of communicative English 'on the ground' and (b) the contexts for communicative use of English within Bangladesh at that time. As a crucial element of the EIA research agenda, these studies will be repeated and extended on a three yearly cycle. Over time they will enable post-initiative comparisons to be made to determine what improvements have occurred and how, if at all, EIA has contributed to enhanced use of spoken English and in which particular contexts.

Demonstrating achievement and success

EIA aims to achieve measurable qualitative changes in the way that English is taught – and consequently learned – in Bangladesh such that useful communicative English results. Communicative English can be used as a tool by learners to gain access to a range of opportunities that will enable them to improve their life chances and economic prospects. In order to be considered a success, EIA will ultimately need to demonstrate both that the communicative use of English has improved over the life of the project and also that people in Bangladesh are better prepared to benefit from economic and social participation in the global environment.

English is a compulsory subject in Bangladeshi schools at both Primary and Secondary levels. Although the national *English for Today* curriculum stresses communicative use of the language, this does not appear to be implemented successfully. Concerns have been expressed about the inability of students and adults to communicate effectively in English (e.g. Chowdhury & Ha, 2008; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008; Hamid, Sussex & Khan, 2009).

While EIA seeks to touch the lives of millions of people, fundamentally the project is not driven by numbers alone. As English is already taught in Bangladeshi schools, the aim of EIA is not to increase the number of people learning English, but to change the nature of the teaching and learning experience such that significant numbers of people are better able to communicate in the language. Since the project's prime concern is the *qualitative* differences that can be brought about in learning to use English for communication, it will need to provide evidence of how the teaching and learning of spoken English for the majority of Bangladeshis has been made more effective. Reliable measures of success will necessarily require the collection of a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence that can serve to demonstrate how the effective teaching of English has been achieved. These measures must evidence what qualitative changes have occurred in classrooms (and beyond) in terms of the distinctively new approaches to using resources and techniques for teaching English that are employed.

English in Action: contexts for action and interaction

EIA will employ a range of technologies as tools during the lifetime of the project: for example, iPod (media player) technology will support the development of teaching strategies and young adults will be able to access English Language learning via television programmes and mobile phones. These and other tools and technologies are important elements that will contribute to the implementation of project interventions. However, in terms of the EIA school-based activities, a major contributing factor is that they are underpinned by Supported Open Learning (SOL), a successful and well-established teaching and learning strategy (see, for example, Robinson & Latchem, 2003). SOL is distinctly different from the typical teacher training strategies that have been applied previously in Bangladesh. Unlike intensive residential courses that involve teachers in going away from their school environment to training centres, SOL methods enable teachers to learn about new communicative approaches to teaching English while remaining in their schools where they can immediately apply what they learn to their classroom practices. Participating teachers receive support and guidance at a local level throughout the interventions. SOL will improve the potential for teachers to develop links between new teaching practices, their own subject expertise and the application of the new methods in their own classrooms (Perraton, Creed & Robinson, 2002). The SOL approach is preferable for reasons of scalability, sustainability and cost, which is lower than a traditional face-to-face 'training-centre' approach (Oliveira & Orivel, 2003).

During the pilot phase of the project the Primary intervention will identify the most effective model of SOL for Bangladeshi Primary teachers and determine which types of technology can help in its delivery. This will be achieved through collaboration with teachers and a range of educational and institutional stakeholders working across all six administrative Divisions of Bangladesh. During this same period the Secondary intervention will place the emphasis on a blended approach to teacher education (Power & Shrestha, 2010). Secondary teachers will have contact with other teachers and trainers in workshops and meetings. They will also be able to enhance their learning at any time through the use of communicative language teaching materials and resources, including audio and video, which can be accessed on hand-held media players.

Adult learning will be enabled via interactive and digital media. EIA will produce new television programmes for both a youth magazine and a drama series. These can be viewed on cable and satellite channels and will link to lessons for improving spoken English that will be available via mobile phones and the Internet.

Representing success: the role of the baseline studies and sector-based research and evaluation activity

Baseline Research

Any discussion of how successful EIA has been will require pre- and post-intervention comparisons to be made. Much of the quantitative and qualitative data gathered in relation to project interventions must be compared with relevant features of the situation that existed in Bangladesh at the outset of the project. For that reason a set of pre-intervention Baseline

Studies was undertaken to articulate key elements of the communicative environment – the complex of often inter-related factors that impact on EIA's purpose to "increase significantly the number of people able to communicate in English".

Collectively, the Baseline Studies are useful both in evidencing key features of the communicative environment in Bangladesh, and in establishing the complexities of the circumstances in which learning to communicate in English and the EIA interventions would co-exist (Rae & Kirkwood, 2009). Findings from the Baseline Studies can also inform intervention strategies, as they offer an evidence-based 'reality check' regarding salient features of the broader project environment.

The Baseline Studies involved a range of data gathering approaches, and information was collected from about 17,000 people. In addition, more than 350 English lessons were observed in primary and secondary schools located in many parts of Bangladesh. The data gathering techniques included detailed interviews, surveys, observations, audits and desk research. The studies involved collecting information and data related to the following key topics:

English language proficiency – The level of competence in the use of spoken English in schools (teachers and students) and among adults in the community.

Socio-linguistic factors – The motivations for and barriers to learning English and individual experiences of using communicative English. Also, the demand for communicative English in the workplace and in post-school education.

Teachers' pedagogical practices – Evidence of the ways in which English is taught in primary and secondary school classes.

Existing teaching materials & English language training – Audits of existing materials to support the teaching of English in primary and secondary schools and of arrangements for English language training for teachers and adults.

The technology environment – Assessments of the existing technological infrastructure and its impact upon people within Bangladesh, including individual's access, familiarity with and use of a range of technologies.

Media consumption – Conducted by the BBC World Service Trust to establish levels of access to English language media outputs and related issues, including the barriers to learning English and connections with the wider Diaspora community.

Sector-based Research & Evaluation

Throughout the life of the project, a range of studies will provide both formative and summative evaluations of the various interventions. EIA aims to enhance the learning of communicative English in three key sectors, with interventions involving primary schools, secondary schools and informal adult learning opportunities. Interventions in the Primary sector focus largely upon the development of materials and resources (e.g. audio recordings and posters) to support teaching and learning of the communicative aspects of the English syllabus. However, teachers' professional practices will be influenced by those resources and also by the associated programme of support and development activities. Regular meetings take place within the local Upazila context and enable participating teachers to receive guidance and feedback from EIA trainers and to share experiences and good practice with other teachers involved with the project. Secondary sector interventions involve supported teacher training through media-based self-study resources combined with additional enhancement opportunities to stimulate participants' reflective practice and personal development as English teachers. To promote informal adult learning, the EIA interventions involve a range of technologies to inspire and support individual adults as they improve their use of communicative English within authentic contexts. The adult interventions also aim to influence the media sector within Bangladesh, so that over time there will be a range of quality mass media outputs that include spoken English.

At the level of these sector-based interventions a range of qualitative and quantitative data will be gathered in order to generate a rich picture of the effects of the project. These will include, for example, accounts of how teachers have enhanced their pedagogic practices or how students' competence in spoken English has developed. In both the primary and secondary sectors three indicators have been selected to illustrate the changes. These are 'Reach', i.e. the numbers of schools, teachers and pupils participating in the interventions; 'Practice', i.e. how teachers evidence communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches in their classroom practices; and 'English Language competence', i.e. the extent of teachers' and students' demonstrable competence in spoken English. Data on these indicators will be collected through a variety of methods including:

- quantitative analysis of the Project Management Information System to identify the numbers involved

- qualitative evaluation of participation to identify trends in teacher's activities through case studies, etc.

- large-scale surveys based on Observation techniques to examine practices

- in-depth case studies using video and audio recordings

- large-scale sample surveys to measure competence using both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse results and practice.

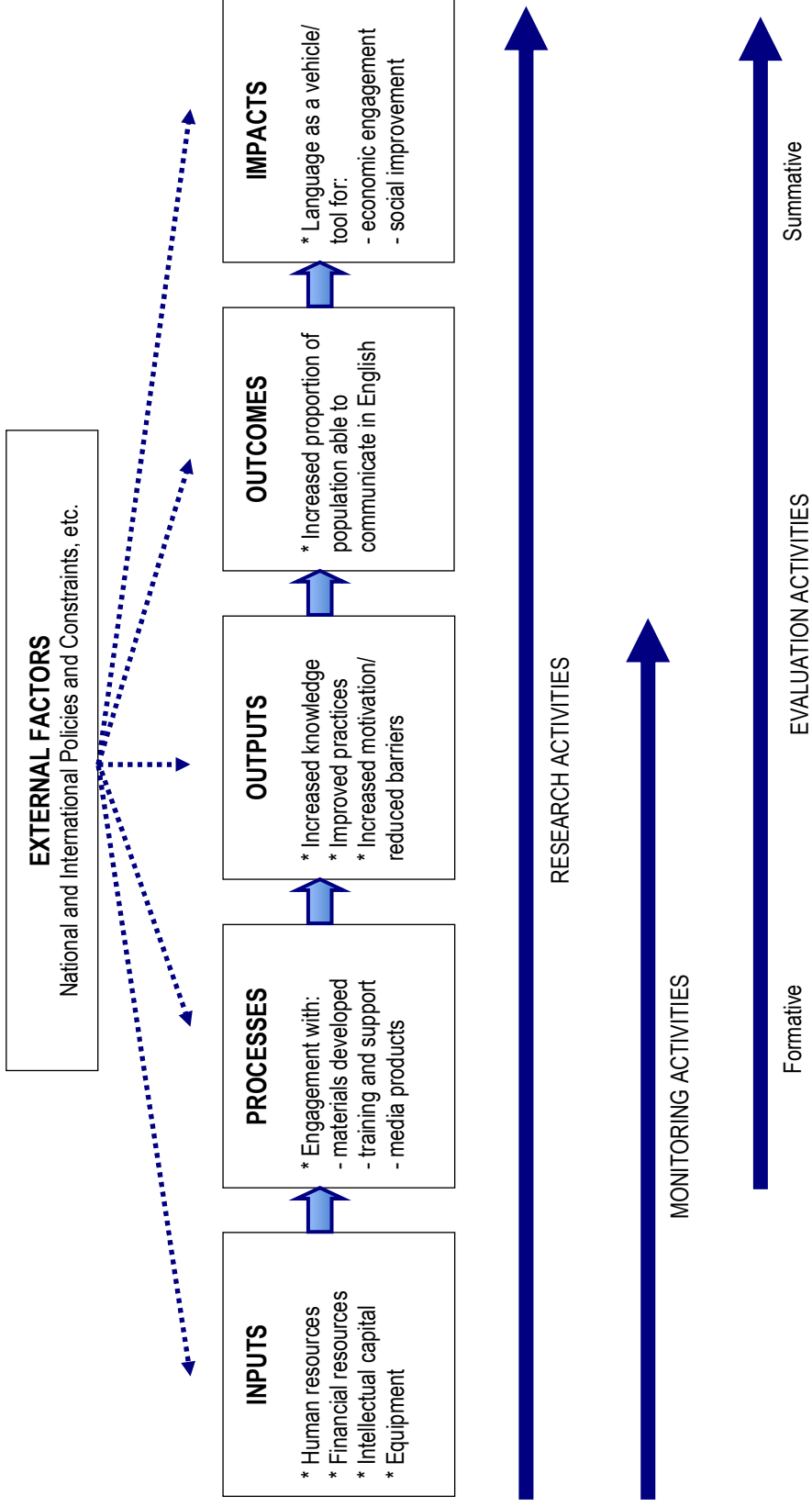At the level of the adult interventions different techniques will be employed. These will include:

- national quantitative audience surveys to measure access, reach and exposure

- longitudinal qualitative tracking surveys to measure audience engagement

- interviews to assess perception changes

- monitoring of English language media output to assess development

- in-depth interviews with the UK-based Bangladeshi Diaspora

- quantitative analysis of project activity monitoring

The information and data gathered through these sector-based studies will be used not only for *summative* purposes – to assess the performance and impact of the EIA interventions, but also to serve a *formative* role – informing the development of materials, resources, infrastructure and support mechanisms (see Scriven, 1967 for more on the differences between formative and summative evaluations).

Quality outputs: Framing research, monitoring and evaluation to examine individual experiences

Specifying an appropriate framework for EIA research, monitoring and evaluation not only involves determining the appropriate scope and scale of activities and determining appropriate methods of data collection and analysis, but also requires a clear articulation of how the proposed studies relate to stages of project as it develops. Figure 1, below, provides a representation of what is required during the lifetime of the project.

Figure 1: Project Evolution and Research, Monitoring & Evaluation Activities
[Adapted from: US Aid Technical Note No. 10. February 2006]

EXTERNAL FACTORS
National and International Policies and Constraints, etc.

INPUTS

* Human resources
* Financial resources
* Intellectual capital
* Equipment

PROCESSES

* Engagement with:
  - materials developed
  - training and support
  - media products

OUTPUTS

* Increased knowledge
* Improved practices
* Increased motivation/ reduced barriers

OUTCOMES

* Increased proportion of population able to communicate in English

IMPACTS

* Language as a vehicle/ tool for:
  - economic engagement
  - social improvement

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

MONITORING ACTIVITIES

EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

Formative

Summative

5

In order to demonstrate the quality of learner's experience and engagement with the various EIA interventions it is not sufficient to focus evaluation studies on their experiences of the materials, resources, training and support provided by the project. The 'Outputs' for EIA are not those tangible assets developed for the project; they are *the intended effects that those assets have upon all the individuals involved with the interventions*. The materials, resources and support might be excellent and the numbers of people engaging with them might be extremely high, but nonetheless the project can only be considered to be successful if it manages to achieve impacts such as increased knowledge and communicative skills, improved practices and increased motivation, as shown in the middle box in Figure 1. Consequently, studies must provide evidence of these qualitative changes among participating students, teachers and adults. Without such changes in the ways that people think and act in relation to communicative English (i.e. their attitudes and behaviours), the long-term 'Outcomes' and 'Impacts' of the EIA project cannot be achieved.

The strategy for research, monitoring and evaluation will support efforts to gather appropriate evidence which can demonstrate numerically and through rich narrative descriptions that quality learning achievements are being realised in relation to communicative English. Over time, the strategy will also contribute to an understanding of the extent to which the project's achievements are both scalable and sustainable. All studies throughout the life of the project must be of the highest possible quality to ensure their usefulness for lesson-learning and decision-making. They must also adhere to ethical principles relating the manner in which they are conducted and reported. Details of these considerations have been shared among EIA partners through a Framework document.

Feedback mechanisms: lessons learned and shared

As already mentioned, it is crucial that research, monitoring and evaluation studies undertaken for EIA should perform *formative* as well as *summative* functions. In other words, there needs to be a continuous process of reviewing progress in the light of the project's experiences and the evaluative data collected. Lessons learned from implementing the interventions can be fed forward into subsequent iterations and further developments of the project to maximise the potential for success. EIA was originally planned to progress through 3 distinct phases, but even within each phase there are opportunities for the approach to be reconsidered and amended as appropriate.

EIA has a wide range of stakeholders and potential beneficiaries. These include the UK Department for International Development (as funders of the project), the education Ministries of the Government of Bangladesh, education officials at Divisional and Upazila levels, non-governmental organisations that provide school education, head teachers, English teachers, students, teacher trainers, parents/guardians, local communities, young adults, employers and media professionals. Each of these parties will have a different view about what constitutes a successful outcome in their own particular context and needs. The various interests of the stakeholders and beneficiaries must be addressed when considering the findings and lessons learned from research and evaluation studies. A series of consultative meetings will ensure that all interested parties have opportunities to articulate their needs and to influence the conduct of studies that aim to demonstrate the impacts of the project.

Conclusions

English in Action aims to achieve measurable qualitative changes in the way that English is taught and learned in Bangladesh such that useful communicative English results. Pre-intervention Baseline Studies were undertaken to articulate key elements of the communicative environment and to offer an evidence-based 'reality check' regarding salient features of the broader project environment. Sector-based research and evaluation focuses upon primary schools, secondary schools and informal adult learning opportunities. It is essential that a range of qualitative and quantitative data is gathered to generate a rich picture of the effects of the project that can serve both *formative* and *summative* roles. The key project 'outputs' are the effects that EIA resources and support mechanisms are intended to have upon all the individuals involved with the interventions. Of particular significance is the

fact that EIA has a wide range of stakeholders and potential beneficiaries whose interests must be explored and addressed.

References

Chowdhury, R. & Ha, P. L. (2008) Reflecting on Western TESOL training and communicative language teaching: Bangladeshi teachers' voices, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education,* 28 (3) 305-316.

English in Action (2008) *English in Action Project - Project Memorandum*.

Hamid, M. O. & Baldauf, R. B. (2008) Will CLT bail out the bogged down ELT in Bangladesh? *English Today,* 24 (3), 16-24.

Hamid, M. O., Sussex, R. and Khan, A. (2009) Private Tutoring in English for Secondary School Students in Bangladesh, *TESOL Quarterly,* 43 (2) 281-308.

Oliveira, J. B. & Orivel, F. (2003) 'The costs of distance education for training teachers', in B. Robinson & C. Latchem (Eds.) *Teacher Education Trough Open and Distance Learning*, London: Routledge Falmer / The Commonwealth of Learning.

Perraton, H., Creed, C. & Robinson, B. (2002) *Teacher Education Guidelines: Using Open and Distance Learning.* Paris, UNESCO. Available online from: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001253/125396e.pdf (accessed 11th August 2010).

Power, T. and Shrestha, P. (2010) What role for mobile technologies in open and distance language learning? *Open Learning*, 25 (3).

Rae, J. & Kirkwood, A. (2009) Constructing the foundations of capacity building: Conducting baseline studies for English in Action, Bangladesh. Paper presented at the 8th International Language & Development Conference, Dhaka, June 23-25.

Robinson, B. & Latchem, C. (Eds.) (2003) *Teacher Education Trough Open and Distance Learning*, London: Routledge Falmer / The Commonwealth of Learning.

Scriven, M. (1967) 'The methodology of evaluation'. In M. E. Gredler, *Program Evaluation*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.