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Aid, Development and English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The past few decades have seen the ascendancy of English as the global language of business and international interaction and as a result it has come to be viewed in the minds of many policy makers as fundamental to development. Accordingly English language instruction programmes have increasingly been integrated into development programmes both at a domestic recipient and international donor level. These programmes are frequently framed within the paradigms of empowerment and capacity building yet little readily accessible research seems to be available regarding the practical role English language aid programmes may play in these processes with most examination seeming to be centred either on discourse debate or cost/benefit analysis of programmes.

This thesis endeavours to examine the perceptions of recipients and providers regarding the provision of English language instruction programmes. It finds that despite a provider focus on institutional capacity building extrinsic, primarily economic, considerations ensure that there is a strong recipient demand for these programmes. It also finds that, even with an increasing provider desire to use participatory paradigms, programme parameters are still largely determined by providers due to their control of funds. By reason of this the efficacy of English language instruction in promoting recipient empowerment and capacity building remains open to question.

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Glossary of acronyms used in this research

CUPELS	(The Massey University) Centre for University Preparation English Language Studies
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EIT	Eastern Institute of Technology
ELT	English Language Teaching
ELTO	English Language Training for Officials
ESOL	English to Speakers of Other Languages
EPTB	English Proficiency Test Battery
ETLC	English Target Language Community
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
JET	Japan Exchange and Teaching (Programme)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NZAID	New Zealand Agency for International Development
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TNC	Transnational Corporation
VSA	Volunteer Service Abroad
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

Introduction

English language instruction and study programmes have been a part of the aid scene for many years. Many aid organisations, both large and small, government attached or privately funded, provide English language scholarship programmes. These programmes frequently include residence in an English Language Target Community (ELTC) as a crucial component but many programmes are not just conceived of within a solely linguistic framework. Increasingly English language instruction is becoming viewed as an integral tool to both empower sections of society and enable a society's capacity for development. Despite this rising prevalence it seems at times that much of this paradigm is based more upon anecdotal evidence and supposition than applied research into if English Language Teaching (ELT) programmes, whether they be English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)ⁱ, actually contribute towards the developmental goals of empowerment and capacity building.

The growth of the participatory paradigm

Within the modern development context ELT aid programmes have increasingly come to be framed within the wider aid paradigms of participation, empowerment and capacity building. Therefore in order to attempt to understand how English Language Teaching (ELT) might fit within the current aid and development sector a wider examination needs to be of these paradigms which now dominate much of development planning and thinking.

Participation, empowerment and capacity building were not always the 'buzzwords' they are today. In fact if one went back about forty years policy-makers and theoreticians generally tended to regard development as a process which followed a predictable and linear route (Zachariah, 1997:478). Development was a course of action predicated upon the idea that economic expansion was the way to eradicate poverty and, in the interest of efficiency, was to be determined and primarily delivered by foreign experts (Long, 2001:5).

ⁱ In English language teaching EFL is commonly held to refer to the teaching of English in a non-native English environment such as Thailand whilst ESOL is the teaching of English in a native English environment such as New Zealand.

However, during the 1950s and '60s there was a growing recognition, especially amongst field practitioners, that focusing on macroeconomic goals was not resulting in sustainable changes in the lives of the poor and vulnerable. Many came to the realisation that, contrary to expectations, monetary benefits from modernisation were not 'trickling down' sufficiently to the poor to deliver them from their poverty (Kaplan, 1999:4; Riddell, 197:453-4). This awareness gradually pushed development theory and practice away from the idea of the primacy of the economic. Instead theorists, led to a large extent by practitioners' field observations, came to the view that the answer lay with "the exercise of popular agency in relation to development" (Hickey and Mohan, 2004:3). Development needed to be a multi-dimensional development process "oriented towards local actors" (Pieterse, 1998:368) as such a change was envisioned as enabling the disempowered and the excluded of a society to "participate in, negotiate with, change and hold accountable institutions that affect their well-being" (Klugman, 2002:3) thereby accomplishing sustainable positive change in their circumstances (Stephenson, 1994:225; Long, 2001:7)

Consequently, and with the prodding of practitioners, aid organisations increasingly came to envisage empowerment and capacity building as vital tools in the fight to end the traps of dependency and poverty. The poor were no longer to be perceived as peripheral, passive recipients whose primary (if not only) role was to be as "objects of grandiose schemes" (Mohan, 2002:50). Instead recipients were to be provided with the tools required to enable them "to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives" (Fukuda-Parr, Lopes and Malik, 2002:8) so that they would be empowered with "a capability to be autonomous" (De-Shalit, 2004:804).

Indeed so persuasive has the concept of participation turned out to be that, even though initially associated with the schools of 'alternative development' on the periphery of core development practice and theory, it has achieved mainstream status. In fact so influential has the paradigm of participation become that almost all international development organisations espouse the stance that development and aid are of little worth if they do not promote local capacity and empowerment (Kaplan, 1999:1). Yet for many providers these paradigms are "both an end and a means of achieving other goals" (Stern, Dethier and Rogers, 2005:99) and the notion of seeking to facilitate people's ability to "make qualitative differences to ... [power]

imbalances,” (Taylor, 1995:171) has proved increasingly attractive to policy makers and organisations even though wide divergences exist in the framing of visions and goals.

Education, language and the rise of English

Despite conceptual differences, most development actors generally are in agreement as to the importance of education. Education to its proponents is an integral and a vital component in any empowerment and poverty reduction strategy. It is seen as the vector whereby economic potential – be it societal or individual - can be unleashed to produce healthy, productive societies (James, 1998:3-5). Accordingly many developing countries and development agencies have tended to focus upon the acquisition of basic education skillsⁱⁱ as a means of facilitating the development process. The Commission for Africa typifies this attitude and classifies education as a prime area for major investment (Commission for Africa, 2005:12).

Yet such blanket adoption of “[w]estern views of education ... throughout the world as a part of ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’” (Kobayashi, 1997:665) has had an unintended effect in that it has eased the supplanting of local languages in the classroom by non-indigenous tongues. Language is not apolitical and is an integral part of ethnic identity. Consequently the process of language choice is often fraught with socio-political difficulties and for many post-colonial countries the choice of the official language of instruction has been profoundly influenced by history and prey to political and economic preferences.

Many post-colonial countries were ‘artificial’ constructs created as a result of European political and economic concerns rather than local linguistic and ethnic realities. Faced with a plethora of competing languages new nation states were faced with the dilemma of whether to reject the language of the colonial past, as Burma/Myanmar did, or, as was the case in India, to retain it. In cases such as India the privileging of an indigenous language was seen to exacerbate underlying ethnic division and discord. Therefore in order to prevent conflict the colonial language was retained as the language of power - even though attempts may have been made to

ⁱⁱ Principal goals among these being universal literacy and numeracy.

curtail its position of primacy - as it was viewed as the 'least worst option'. The retention of the colonial language as the language of official power has however meant that mastery of these languages is a keystone to success and social advancement and intriguingly, as can be seen in Figure 1 below, in some post-colonial countries such as Pakistan it has actually been incorporated into the task of nation building (Mosse, 2005:39).

(Source: O'Shea, 2006:1)

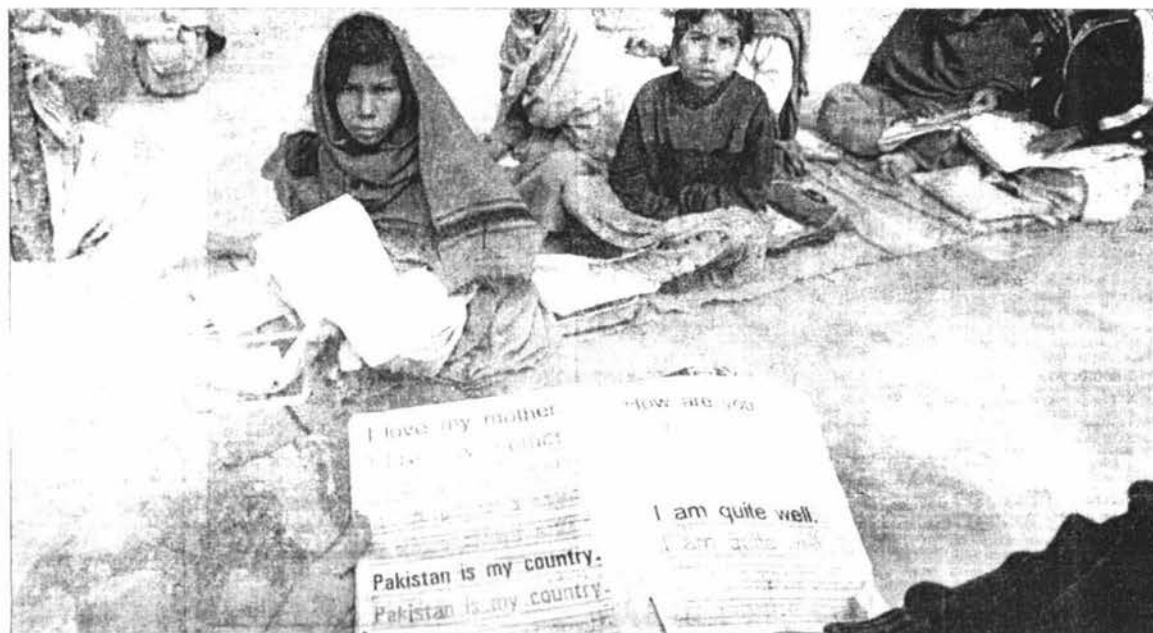


Figure 1 English to promote national identity

English and development politics

Over the past few decades the comparative status of metropolitan languages has changed with English progressively displacing previous colonial languages of power. Countries which have no historic or geographic connections with the English language have come to view the development of English language skills as being so integral to development that its instruction has become a prime element in their education curriculaⁱⁱⁱ (Mosse, 2005:108). For Skutnabb-Kangas (2000:x) this is of great concern as he views such ascendancy as facilitating cultural genocide. To him language is an integral vector in the transmission of cultural traditions and thus the displacement of indigenous languages abets the suppression of local cultural

ⁱⁱⁱ Laos is a good example of this shift.

conventions and perhaps even their eventual supplanting. Williams (2003:39) however adopts a more political viewpoint and for him this “linguistic hegemony” has merely enabled the replacement of the overt exploitation of colonisation with more subtle abuse. Metropolitan languages are an imperially imposed evil directly linked to Western development and not only cause the perpetuation of “an unequal relationship between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ societies ... [but also create] ... new forms of inequality within societies” (ibid).

Whilst such critical analysis is in many ways creditable the condemnation of English as an instrument of domination can frequently feel like the ‘easy option’ as it assumes an inextricable link between the spread of metropolitan languages (of which English is currently almost undoubtedly the most expansive) and the demise of indigenous languages and culture. It seems that much of this sort of criticism is agenda driven and ignores the dynamic nature of people’s relationship with language. English is not automatically a language of repression and the promotion of indigenous linguistic pluralism does not inherently create equality and empowerment for those at the sharp end of society (Ricento, 2000:2). Imperialist experiences and language repression are not limited solely to European languages and as can be seen in China and Burma/Myanmar an ‘indigenous’ language or dialect can just as easily be an agent of repression, oppression and homogenisation.

ELT for empowerment and capacity building

Language spread, like religion, has always followed dominance and “is by its very nature ... always a reflection of power – political, technological, economic, cultural [and] religious” (Crystal, 2004:3) and English acquisition has acquired status as a sign of modernism and progress. Development has ceased to be just tied to vernacular literacy and as a consequence ELT programmes have increasingly been integrated into development aid strategies. In many ways aid and development agencies can be seen as being active promoters of this process for English has become the *de facto* operational language for many large-scale aid providers. There seems an unacknowledged acceptance on the part of many multi-national providers that the accurate delivery of a project requires locals to acquire English language skills (Mosse, 2005:108).

ELT has become big business even though neither providers nor recipients can seemingly articulate exactly how the development of English language skills “relates to a poverty-alleviating strategy” (VSO, 2004; 4). Some of this lack of examination can perhaps be attributed to the fact that for all funded aid actions politics are an ever present reality both for recipients and donors. ELT development programmes are equally tied to wider political and economic goals - whether stated or unstated. In the case of the New Zealand Agency for International Development’s (NZAID) English Training for Officials (ELTO) programme historically one of the programme’s principal stated aims was the promotion of “greater awareness and appreciation of New Zealand in the regions [thus] laying the basis for positive and cooperative relationships” (O’Sullivan and Huong, 2002:1). While this emphasis has receded many providers and funders still persist in viewing English language instruction as the “single best way to build positive, lasting relationships [and] ... a more favourable view ...as a result of their studies” (De Lotbiniere, 2007:3) rather than as a tool to empower and enable the recipient.

There is an apparent increasingly pervasive feeling amongst both donors and recipients that those who lack English language skills either face falling behind or even worse being ‘doomed’ to the lower strata of society. Yet ironically there are indications that the promotion of English as a medium of instruction may actually aggravate the problems of disadvantaged sections of societies. Recent research suggests that policies which push second-language-medium education can, rather than empowering people, actually work against wider educational attainment (Moore, 2005:1). Such problems are identified as being especially severe for members of ethnic minorities who commonly struggle to achieve educational proficiency because they lack access to adequate schooling and, due to afore mentioned nationalistic political reasons, must grapple with a language of instruction which is essentially foreign to their vernacular tongue (ibid). An added concern is that if ELT programme control falls either directly or indirectly to those already in positions of power and authority then there is a real possibility that programme placement will merely reflect and perpetuate a society’s status quo rather than aiding the empowerment of the disadvantaged sections of that society (ELTO Review, 2002:20).

Nevertheless to a large extent much of the debate over the pros and cons of English language education is superfluous. Organisations, both profit and non-profit, simply see themselves as responding to the wishes of their ‘clients’ however they may be defined. The reality is that, for whatever reason, English language skills have come to be seen as a ‘prerequisite’ to a better life both at personal and professional levels. In fact in many countries such is the dominance of English in the realms of education and research that there is a strong sense that English language ability is an essential precondition for success in these areas and over “social advancement in general” (Stroud, 2003:17).

Other impetuses for people’s desire for English language acquisition are even more pragmatic. Although often either derided or criticised by those opposing globalisation, one does not need to travel far to witness that the vision of the comfortable consumerism of the ‘American Dream’ is something that profoundly motivates people (Baker, 1996:55). With English increasingly being used by Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and tourists as their language of communication, the ability to communicate in English has effectively become, or is at least perceived to be, a ‘precondition’ for people in developing countries to making a decent living.

Research relevance

As a result of the forces mentioned previously English is progressively forming an integral part of the development dialogue with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) noting that ELT is “so crucial to international development that ... a fixed element of the UK overseas aid programme ... [has been] specifically set aside to support it” (VSO position paper^{iv}, 2004:10). If one examines many of these programmes it soon becomes apparent that empowerment and capacity building are a frequent focus. Yet there appears to be a dichotomy in the interface between the large personal and financial investment that all parties put into ELT and the benefits derived from those efforts. It is therefore somewhat surprising to discover how little available literature* seems to actually examine the relationship between English language instruction programmes and these development paradigms. This seeming lack of scrutiny of English language instruction programmes is even more remarkable given that many

^{iv} The VSO paper omits any figures regarding the amount of funds EFL programmes receive.

organisations such as Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) and NZAID have had long standing commitments to such programmes.

Although ELT programmes are often actively promoted it would seem that with many communities and individuals facing pressing issues regarding the provision of such basic needs as clean water there are questions over the efficacy of the use of EFL for development. In fact at times it almost seems that the confidence in the positive nature of provision of ELT programmes is based more upon faith than demonstrable fact. As an experienced teacher of English as a Second Language my assessment is that the primary reason for this state of affairs is that English language learning does not lend itself readily to scientific measurability. Equally this lack of research could be due to the perception that ELT programmes fall between two disciplines - Development Studies and Linguistics - which appear to have very little cross-fertilisation between them. When these factors are combined with wider issues involved in trying to quantifiably measure change in abstract concepts such as empowerment it is easy to see why research on this issue apparently lacks the breadth and depth it would seem to require.

Yet aid and development programmes operate in a world which requires definitive measurable delivery outcomes. In view of the increasingly ubiquitousness of English in the development field and the prevalent belief on behalf of both providers and recipients as to the benefits of English language instruction there would seem to be a definite need to examine ELT aid programmes in a way other than by using the standard cost/benefit analysis model. To this end this thesis research has sought the opinions and assessments of participants and instructors involved with the provision of ELT programmes in order to examine the following research questions:

- What is the perceived role of ELT in development?
- How do participants and providers view the acquisition of English language skills in reference to individual empowerment and capacity building?
- How are ELT aid programmes which involve a period of immersion in an English Target Language Community (ELTC) perceived to fit into the wider developmental paradigms of empowerment and capacity building?

- If ELT programmes are to be an integral part of empowerment and capacity building policies and strategies how might they be made more responsive and relevant?

By gathering this data this thesis seeks to ascertain what points of convergence and difference there might be both between recipients and providers and between provider administrators and English language instructors with the aim of helping to inform the future design and provision of present and future ELT programmes.

Methodology

In order to obtain a more holistic view of provider and recipient views of English Language Teaching programmes a mixed research methodology of quantitative and qualitative methods was sought. To this end it was originally envisioned that the research would include:

- field observation of an EFL aid programme
- the use of a questionnaire to elicit participant views on the English language and ELT programmes
- the conducting of semi-structured interviews with providers and instructors of ELT programmes to obtain their viewpoints

It was anticipated that the adoption of these research methods would create a responsive, flexible and reflective research project in which comparisons could be made between in-country programmes and those which entail learning in an ELTC context. To accomplish this aim the participant questionnaire and the questions for the semi-structured interviews were formulated so that they could be used both during the envisaged fieldwork and in the New Zealand based part of the research.

Although a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods was sought the research primarily focused on the use of quantitative research tools due to my belief that language acquisition and feelings of empowerment, despite efforts to submit them to scientifically measurable tests and statistics, remain primarily personal and subjective. Bearing this in mind the interviews and survey questions were designed to provide a platform which would enable the participants to present their own ideas and

personal impressions regarding English and its place in the development context. The hope was that this would illuminate my key research questions and consequently enable me to construct a general narrative on the conceptualisation and characterisation of the role of ELT programmes in the aid and development area.

Chapter outline

This thesis has been divided into the following broad chapters:

Chapter One examines the present dominance of the empowerment and capacity building paradigms within aid discourse.

Chapter Two explores education as a part of empowerment and capacity building strategies and how, despite the politics of discourse, English language instruction has grown in importance and is now seen by many as being an integral part of education and development strategies.

Chapter Three gives a more detailed overview of the methods used in this research and looks at some of the issues involved in attempting to apply the research design.

Chapter Four presents the research findings and has been divided into two broad areas. The first focuses on results from the questionnaire administered to programme participants within New Zealand. The second deals primarily with information gathered from interviews with ELT programme instructors and administrators.

Chapter Five discusses the research data gathered in more depth.

The Conclusion attempts to evaluate ELT as an effective vector for empowerment and capacity building.

Overview

This introduction has outlined how a large number of aid organisations view empowerment and capacity building as fundamental constituents in the development process and as a result promote such programmes within their armoury of projects. Education is envisaged as an integral element of these two broad paradigms as it is

viewed as being a powerful agent in facilitating social change by giving individuals and communities enhanced capacity for independent action and autonomous choice. The seemingly unstoppable global expansion and importance of the English language has, despite vigorous debate over whether European models are effective for those with differing socio-cultural background and ethos (Zachariah, 1997:pp478-81; Aoki et al, 2002: pp233-5), meant that English language acquisition has increasingly entered into the development and educational equation.

As a consequence ELT programmes have increasingly found their way into aid programmes. Donors and recipients have, despite criticism that the provision of ELT aid programmes perpetuates the current political, cultural and economic world system, seemingly surrendered to a tacit belief that increasing the English language abilities of societies will ensure “benefits will flow on” (personal e-mail communication from NGO official, 2006^v). This research will examine this proposition and, by means of the administering of questionnaires and conducting of interviews, endeavour to discover what role providers and participants perceive ELT programmes play in the context of recipient empowerment and capacity building strategies. Although in no way definitive, it is hoped that any results from this research will help to inform aid organisations and practitioners (both government and non-governmental) in the design of suitably sensitive and responsive English aid programmes.

^v To ensure confidentiality the exact source of this communication has been not named.