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English language and economic and social opportunity: Case studies of underprivileged Bangladeshi school leavers

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Abstract

Can enhanced opportunities for English language learning ensure better life chances for underprivileged youth in Bangladesh? In order to gain insight into this question, this study presents case studies of four UCEP school leavers who have recently entered formal employment. UCEP (Underprivileged Children's Educational Programs) schools provide education to working children, who often have not previously been able to attend school, owing to poverty and the need to work to support their families. UCEP enables children to achieve exam success in the formal curriculum (which includes English), but also offers older secondary students skills development in relation to the workplace, leading to guaranteed employment for its graduates. Many UCEP English teachers participated in EIA professional development programmes with the result that they have endeavoured to introduce active learning approaches into their classroom practice.

These case studies explore whether and how UCEP graduates use the English competencies that they have developed through EIA, and whether and how some of these uses have led to economic benefit for the individuals. Results indicate that English plays a role in gaining employment, but also has benefits in terms of esteem and promotion within the current workplace. Participants articulate a clear perception that good English skills will be key to new employment opportunities. The case studies also identify a number of significant challenges faced by these underprivileged graduates, despite the potential social and economic benefits accruing from competence in English.¹

Cambridge Education is the umbrella brand name used for education work in Mott MacDonald and includes references to education work done under the names of Mott MacDonald or BMB Mott MacDonald.

1 Introduction

It is widely assumed that the development of citizens' competence in English language increases economic opportunities -for example through improving access to world markets- for developing countries (see Erling and Seargeant, 2013). This assumption underlies, for example, the long- running *English in Action* (EIA) project in Bangladesh and is articulated in its Theory of Change (Power et al., 2012). This paper reports on a small-scale study designed to gather evidence of the effect of improving English competence on the lives of a small group of individuals educated within the Underprivileged Children's Educational Program (UCEP) in Bangladesh.

UCEP is a leading non-government organization (NGO) providing general education and vocational training in schools across the country to around 30,000 poor working children who have missed out on primary education. Students follow an abridged version of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum used in all government primary and secondary schools for grades 1 to 8. Curriculum subjects include Bangla (mother tongue), mathematics and English. UCEP's English teaching is supported by EIA through teacher development activities and classroom resources. The UCEP curriculum is vocationally oriented and students learn in a practical way, using English as appropriate as technical language (EiA, 2009). After grade 8 UCEP continues Technical Education training in 16 professional trades (see UCEP, 2008 for more detail about these trades).

The research focuses on the experiences of a group of individuals educated in UCEP schools, exploring whether and how people English is used in real life contexts, and whether and how these uses may have led to economic benefit for each individual. In particular, four themes were examined

- the use of the English language;
- the role of English in improving employment and earnings;
- how English skills are perceived by others in the workplace;
- the perceived significance of English skills in future earnings or career development.

This paper presents, as case studies, the findings concerning two UCEP school leavers who had recently entered formal employment.

2 General findings

This paper reports on two interviewees for the case studies, and the choice of these two individuals was largely governed by the need to represent findings common to the whole cohort.

11 of the cohort of 14 were female with eight of these working in the junior positions of assistant nursing, and the other three in low positions in the garment industry. Of the four original case studies three were female and all working in the assistant nursing field.

To varying degrees every one of the wider group felt English was important in providing them with opportunities. There was a marked difference in the perceptions of garment workers and those in the nursing profession in respect of, on the one hand, the extent to which English was needed in their jobs and, on the other hand, the promotional and financial prospects that English was perceived as conveying. Those in the garment industry saw little practical professional benefit in their current positions, and some mentioned that while English was likely to be of benefit in senior jobs that required more responsibility, it appears that these are invariably held by men. However, even the garment workers saw English as a necessary or very desirable skill for better work and social prospects in the future.

The assistant nurses all felt that English is either essential or extremely important in getting promotion and the higher salaries that go with it. Those in the nursing field also stressed that English was essential in order for them to carry out routine parts of their work such as filling in release forms (always in English) and conveying the contents of these to patients, and understanding information about clinical matters such as drug doses and medical procedures. They reported that without any English they would not be able to carry out their duties properly (and safely). It seems that in hospitals women can enter positions of responsibility which convey social as well as professional status, and without exception all of the interviewees in the nursing field referred to this in some way.

Of the three males interviewed in the wider cohort, one is an electrical technician (and was the subject of one of the original four case studies) and the other two have not found work in the field for which UCEP has prepared them (electrical technicians) but instead work more informally in small retail businesses as shopkeepers. It is perhaps not surprising that the two in retail probably see the least need for English in their current profession, but even here (with names of products etc.) they see advantages of knowing English and both feel that English will be important in helping them achieve better jobs or (in one case) be essential in fulfilling a desire to work overseas.

3 Methodology

UCEP school leavers were initially contacted by telephone, in the year they had left school, in order to identify students who had participated in EIA supported English lessons and who felt that their English skills had benefitted them in financial and other ways. A total of 14 UCEP school leavers (aged 16-19), in the early stages of technical careers, were identified from these telephone interviews for further face-to-face interview; those selected had expressed the perception that the English they had learned at school had been of considerable help to them in some way and may also have been of financial benefit.

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview format and were recorded and transcribed in Bangla. From the Bangla transcripts, four cases were identified by local and UK researchers working together. Cases were selected on the basis that they were representative of the responses given across the whole sample and gave the richest overall account of experiences. Data from these were translated into English, analysed and written up as case studies.

The accounts are illustrative of the way English is used at work, at home and in other contexts and show how UCEP school leavers perceive their English language competence to be of social and economic benefit. They also, to some extent, provide testimony of their continuing struggles as young adults with underprivileged backgrounds.

Two of the four case studies are presented in this paper. All names used are fictitious.

4 Case study 1: Mujabeen (female)

4.1 Background information

Mujabeen's story seems to typify many who have been through UCEP, with poverty, family struggles for survival (both financial and in terms of health) and a determination to make the best of one's circumstances being consistently strong influences. She is 20 years old and currently studying for an HSC at the Open University of Bangladesh. Her father works in a shop and her mother is a housewife. She has two brothers.

In her case the family could not meet the expenses of the school she attended and she entered UCEP in class 7. Her intention was to join the technical school "after passing class 8", but after she had successfully completed her studies it transpired there were no places for females. She was eventually admitted to class 9, passed her SSC examination (in 2011) and joined the technical school. Following this she obtained an internship at the Japan-Bangladesh Friendship Hospital.

Her mother then fell ill and Mujabeen could not work for six months (presumably because she had to look after the family). She was then offered a job interview by UCEP for a post at the Apollo Hospital. Despite the competition of 300 other applicants, Mujabeen was the successful candidate. However, owing to no "hostel space" being provided with the post, and the fact that travel from her home was not practical, she could not take up the position. She was found a position in the (much nearer) Hi-Tech multi-care Hospital in order to learn about becoming a research assistant in the hospital.

Mujabeen said that the "senior Madam" (it is assumed that this is a member of UCEP staff) made it clear that (quite apart from the practical difficulties) she would be better off at the Hi-tech hospital rather than the Apollo ("or others") because everyone in the other hospitals "speaks in English" and "since you studied very little, you will not be fine there". Evidently the Hi-Tech hospital was willing to appoint her immediately as a "nurse" rather than "assistant nurse" (as other hospitals would have done). While advantageous to Mujabeen, this does raise questions. Certainly it appears that Mujabeen's choices were limited owing to her lack of English. Nevertheless, she seems to have done well at the Hi-tech Hospital and is, after just 13 months experience, now in charge of the male ward.

4.2 Using English since leaving school (socially and professionally)

4.2.1 At work

Mujabeen says that English is used at work between the "foreign delegates" and that these people ask her questions in English which she is unable to answer. She stated several times that this makes her feel bad. She said few of the nurses can converse in English beyond basics such as greetings.

She also said that the doctors often converse in English and it frustrates her that she can't understand. It is only when she "sees the files" that she can understand the "problems" they have discussed. These problems involve patients' conditions, and clearly she feels excluded and unable to contribute to these potentially important discussions owing to her lack of sufficient English.

Along with others in the medical profession in this study, Mujabeen mentioned that the patients' discharge files are in English. The nurses need to make the patients understand what is written there, but often don't have the English ability to do this and have to seek help from the duty doctors. "In that case some doctors

understand that we have come from UCEP. So, they make us understand but sometimes they get angry that we don't know English".

There are two interesting issues here. One is the fact that nurses need English to convey the contents of the discharge files to the patients (although this raises the question of why the files need to be in English in the first place!) and, perhaps more significantly, that the status of being a UCEP student is somehow seen as shameful.

Mujabeen stressed that her particular hospital actively recruits from UCEP which means they would assume a low level of English, but "in other hospitals I think I will need English". Again, this implies that a lack of English limits opportunities in the nursing field. Mujabeen went on to mention that when she worked in the Japan-Bangladesh hospital the doctors did not help the nurses to understand English from the discharge files (the implication is that they are expected to know it). She said that for UCEP student nurses it is very difficult to learn English as they are from poor families and have to use their sparse resources to support themselves while learning to be nurses, and also to send money back to support their families. While this is undoubtedly Mujabeen's experience, studies of English language attainment in government schools (e.g. EIA 2009) suggest there is no reason to expect the English of UCEP alumni to be at a lower level than those who attended conventional schools.

Mujabeen said that job advertisements in the Bangladeshi national papers ask for "good proficiency in spoken English". She said that even for Hi-Tech hospital she prepared her CV in English (as expected). "Everything was in English". She said that she did not mention anything about her own level of English in the CV (which, like almost everyone else in this study, she had help in preparing).

On being asked about her interviews for nursing jobs, Mujabeen made it clear that panels were interested in her level of English.

Mujabeen also said that on a day-to-day basis she uses very minimal amounts of spoken English (greetings, "yes", "no", "sorry", "good night" were all given as examples). She implied that she keeps it minimal because she is worried that if the conversation enters further stages she will not understand: "Even though I want to converse in English with them, I think, if I start conversing in English with them, then I might not be able to continue." She added that it is necessary to use such English words. She said that using English terms (presumably for the foreign patients) can be consoling to them when they are in pain and it is appreciated and eases their situation. She also said that English is generally used for medical terminology (she gave the examples of "scissors", "syringe" and "artery").

4.2.2 At home:

Mujabeen also mentioned that her friends sometimes send text messages in English, which again, she is unable to understand ("which is very sad"). She also mentioned that her younger brother (in class 9) is better at English than she is and she sometimes needs to seek help from him (which she finds embarrassing).

4.3 Importance of English for getting a job/higher salary

Mujabeen reiterated that knowing some English helped her in getting the post at the Japan-Bangladesh hospital but that this didn't really play a role in getting a post at the Hi-Tech hospital as they concentrated on UCEP recruitment and had low expectations of their English. But she also said that one of the interviewers did attempt to ask her questions in English, who was then told by the others that because she was from UCEP she wouldn't be able to answer. They then asked all questions in Bangla but (significantly) continued to talk in English amongst themselves. She said it would have been "much better" if

she could have spoken more English as she “felt bad” not being able to do so. She also said that if her English was better she would have better promotion prospects. She gave the example of a nurse in her hospital who was promoted to take responsibility for “VIP patients” and Mujabeen feels that had her English been better she would have been given that responsibility and “then I would have felt good”. It is notable that Mujabeen often talks of her feelings of worth concerning her abilities (or lack of them) in English. She went on to say that VIP patients are important for the hospital’s status, and the Managing Director of the hospital makes a point of visiting them. “If he finds that the nurse who is attending the VIP patient cannot speak English well, then he replaces her with (one) who can speak English well. This can be sad for that nurse who cannot speak English well.”

Mujabeen, on being asked how her English compares with other UCEP graduates, said that she is better, and gave the interesting example that when the hospital’s managing director rings with an enquiry, the other UCEP nurses (whose English is not so good) generally pass the call to someone else, whereas Mujabeen makes a point of managing in English and communicating with him. She said “on one occasion he liked it very much and told a concerned person to consider me when they would provide increment to the employees the next time”. This is clearly a direct example of how some knowledge of English (even a very slight one) can be financially advantageous in the workplace. She also said that “the other sisters/nurses ask for my help before entering into the Managing Director Sir’s room.”

4.3.1 Status and value of English

As already noted, Mujabeen has experienced benefits through attempting to use the little English she has, and this has singled her out in a positive way with the Managing Director of her hospital.

4.3.2 Future importance of English for career prospects

Mujabeen talked about her ambition to complete her Diploma in nursing and then after a year to work at one of the “good hospitals like Lab Aid, Popular or Medinova” She plans to become a “diploma nurse”, moving on from her current position as “assistant to nurse” and she described how this would have many practical as well as financial advantages to her. She said that the pay is almost double her current salary (around 10,000 Tk instead of around 5,500 Tk). However, she added that she will need English “a lot” in these institutions. Patients “will come from all over the world.....Many times, many things can be asked in English. Here this is a relaxed a bit, but that might not happen there. In that case I think English will be necessary.” Was there anything about how she might learn that?

4.4 Reflection

Mujabeen gave clear examples of how the limited English she possesses has given her an advantage over colleagues with less English. She had earned social and professional capital by knowing some English, moreover her knowledge of English, albeit limited, had helped her at least partly overcome the stigma of being a UCEP graduate. She feels disadvantaged by not being able to speak more English and feels strongly that to achieve her ambitions of working at a “better” institution she has to learn more English.

Mujabeen gave clear examples of where English was necessary in her work (with certain hospital practices, such as reading and writing release forms) and where it was distinctly advantageous (such as in relating to many of the senior staff and some patients).

In terms of remuneration, she gave an example of a direct relationship between level of English and salary. In terms of status, she felt “excluded” from higher positions because her English is limited.

She feels that knowledge of English is integral to her professional development and career progression, but it is not clear how she thinks she will be able to improve her competence in the language further.

5 Case study 2: Sunrata

5.1 Background information

Sunrata was brought up in a rural home for her early childhood but at some point (it was not clear from the interview exactly when) the family needed for economic reasons to move to Dhaka. She said she did not “study much” but completed the SSC and then, after class 8, took up the “Aid to Nurse” UCEP training, followed by 18 months training at the UCEP technical school (in 2010). She has plans to apply for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and then to do a diploma in nursing. She is currently working as a “research assistant” in a hospital radiology department.

Sunrata has a mother, father and a younger brother. Her ambition was to become a doctor “or a member of hospital staff” but she did not achieve this, she says, owing to a combination of economic problems and inattention in her studies. She says she wants “to become a better nurse” (a course of action approved of by her parents) but will need to complete a diploma in nursing or BSC for this and as she cannot do this at a government institution she has to do it privately.

5.2 Using English since leaving school (socially and professionally)

5.2.1 At work

Sumrata said that she does sometimes need to use English in her work as there are “many foreigners”. She doesn’t speak much English with them, but her professional superiors do and she feels it is definitely an advantage to know and speak English in her job. In addition to foreigners, some “educated persons” (from Bangladesh) also speak English to discuss medical matters. She also sometimes speaks with colleagues in English.

She says there is some occasional need to write in English but this is generally just for serial numbers and to clarify what medical tests need to be done. She doesn’t need to fill in the patients’ forms as doctors evidently do that at her hospital. (This differs from practices reported in other hospitals.) She also said that the manuals for the x-ray machines (which she has to be familiar with) are in English, as are the signs in the hospital, the meaning of which she needed to learn when she started working there.

Sumrata said that she has needed to use English in her work during the past week to write the patients’ “report delivery schedule”. This involves writing basic details about the patient and it is evidently “a regulation” in her particular hospital (“The Square”) that this has to be written in English. She also used a number of basic English phrases in spoken English during the preceding week.

She expressed her view that only having a “low” level of English was a disadvantage for her, as some tasks that required a higher level of English were assigned to others.

Sumrata also said that in her specific field of radiology, knowing English is helpful and knowing more would help her to “understand why the patient is suffering” and to explain the reasons to them. It seems that the detail of reports, which are written in English, are only fully understood by the people with “better” positions whose jobs confer a higher status and who are likely to know English. It is not clear why English has to be used in these reports, but it seems from this and other interviews that the practice is common.

5.2.2 At home:

Sumrata “sometimes” uses English with her younger brother at home (he is studying with UCEP in class 8) but she does not teach him English; he goes to a coaching centre for that. She hopes he will go into either the automobile or pipe fitting trade, as both have a good reputation. She says that she sometimes needs to write English at home, though she doesn’t say why.

She rarely watches English movies or listens to English songs and does not use the internet or email. She rarely watches any TV but says she reads English books sometimes.

5.3 Importance of English for getting a job/higher salary

Sumrata said that English “is necessary” and that she can earn a higher salary with English. She also said that job advertisements ask for English as a required skill. In her interview for her current job she was asked to read a paragraph in English and she was asked some English medical terms. She also said she was asked a particular question in English (although she can’t now remember what the question was). In addition her CV (which does not include details of her English proficiency) was in English.

Sumrata said that the books for her nursing course were in both English and Bangla and those in English helped her in achieving her current level of proficiency. Interestingly, on being asked whether English helps to increase her salary she said: “whether the salary increases or not, it feels good to me if English is known”. This may imply that English feeds confidence and provides a sense of fulfilment and empowerment, but may also mean that she did not wish to discuss her personal finances. She went on to say that to achieve better (higher status and higher paid) nursing positions, it is necessary to know English and gave the example of a particular case where someone has gained advantages through having better English.

5.3.1 Status and value of English

Sumrata said that “many senior nurses (have) said that it is better to know more English”. During the interview she referred several times to the opportunities that English can provide and associated English with being well educated. She also said that knowing English and being known to know English carries with it a heightened status. She referred to a colleague in her hospital with good English, saying, “everybody knows him well and says that he is brilliant.”

5.3.2 Future importance of English for career prospects

Sumrata feels it is absolutely necessary to know English to obtain a better job in her chosen field: “without English nothing can be done”. In order to fulfil her plan of becoming a diploma nurse she says she has to study medical science in English and “there is no alternative to that”.

5.4 Reflection

Sumrata needs both spoken and written English (at least to a basic level) regularly in her job and colleagues with higher levels of English can achieve higher status, better paid jobs. Conversely, not knowing English well results in some exclusion.

English (at least in her institution but this appears to be common) is necessary for filling in certain medical documents – even though it is unclear why Bangla could not be used.

Even if English proficiency made no difference to the salary (although she certainly feels it often does) Sunrata still sees it as being very important as it makes her feel good. This implies that English can provide forms of self actualisation and social capital in addition to and beyond financial capital.

She feels that knowing more English will be essential to her in successfully achieving her future career ambitions.

6 Final reflections

Both Sumrata and Mujabeen see English as being linked to pay and status in their work, and in particular as necessary for further advancement. This is in common with others in the nursing profession and seems to reflect a prevalence of English within the environment of Bangladeshi hospitals. The perceived need for English was lower amongst those who had studied electrical engineering, but even this group expressed some appreciation of potential economic benefits of the language.

While it seems clear from the case studies that proficiency in English can be linked directly to improved pay and status, this is in the context of competition with fellow Bangladeshis. There seems to be nothing in the data to suggest English contributes to the overall wealth of the nation. Garment workers mentioned that those in senior positions in their companies needed English, and it may well be that this proficiency is valuable when trading in international markets; that would be an area for further research.

However, the majority of interviewees were clear in their view that English is either important or essential in enabling financial improvement. Moreover, financial improvement was seen, by some at least, as only one benefit of acquiring some English. Underlying many of the responses was a clear perception that English carries with it social and professional capital that can increase confidence, social standing and opportunity.

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