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Author(s): M. Obaidul Hamid and Iffat Jahan
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Language, Identity, and Social Divides: Medium of Instruction Debates in Bangladeshi Print Media

M. OBAIDUL HAMID AND IFFAT JAHAN

This article critically examines the role of language as medium of instruction (MOI) in shaping students' self-perceptions, worldviews, and identities in a globalizing world. We draw on identity and social positioning theories and on Bourdieu's concepts of capital and symbolic struggle to frame our investigation. Using an analytical framework comprising critical discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis, we analyze letters written by Bangla- and English-medium writers to the editor of a Bangladeshi English newspaper to illustrate how discursive identity construction for "self" and "other" engaged the two groups in identity battles. We argue that (*a*) discursive identity politics may not be characterized in essentialist or nonessentialist terms exclusively but may actually draw on both depending on whether the representation is of self or other; and (*b*) although MOI is inextricably linked to social divides, the roots of the divides may lie in the social rather than in the discursive space.

Introduction

English has been perceived as a language of power and mobility in the "non-English speaking" part of the world since British colonial days. This instrumental potential of the language has reached its peak in the context of globalization in which English as a global lingua franca plays a catalyst role. Consequently, English has profoundly affected the educational and social landscapes of many parts of Asia, Africa, and South America. In education, increasingly English is introduced earlier in the curriculum or is adopted as a medium of instruction (MOI), replacing local/national languages. Socially, English has emerged as an embodiment of social desire for mobility, which has also penetrated sociocultural spaces, beyond the realm of instrumentality. The ubiquity of English and the uptake of its discourses across social groups have challenged traditional notions of self, society, national identity, and citizenship in relation to languages. For instance, the increased flows of people and ideas across linguistic, cultural, and political borders

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have attested to the notions of hybridity, multiculturalism, transnationalism, and deterritoriality, questioning the essentialist relationships between language, land, and identity (see Featherstone 1996; Wright 2012). However, the relevance of these postmodernist concepts varies across individuals, groups, and societies, depending on the dominance of the modernist discourses of language and nationalism and the pattern of popular access to the linguistic capital of English and other material resources. Focusing on Bangladesh, this article critically examines the role of MOI in shaping students' self-perceptions, worldviews and identities, and the consequent struggles for identity in a globalized world. Drawing on letters to the editor written by two groups of Bangladeshi students, two questions are explored:

1. How does language as medium of instruction relate to discursive identity construction?
2. How does this discursive divide relate to wider social divisions?

Scholars have defined identity in various ways. Identity construction in this article is understood in a broad sense to refer to the (re)presentation of self and other (Goffman 1959; van Dijk 2006; see the theoretical framework section for further details). It is mainly through language that self and other are constructed, turning identity construction into a discursive act (Block 2007; Lin 2008). Two crucial domains of discursive identity representation are media and education. Media representation is widely considered an act of identification.[1] Similarly, aspects of the educational process including the curriculum, schooling, language, and textbooks are seen as ideological agents of socialization with the potential for identity construction.[2] Within the domain of education, the potential of English, as MOI, to affect identities, equalities, and social harmony has been underscored in research (e.g., Gill 2004; Tsui 2004; Parkinson and Crouch 2011). While the majority of these studies have explored MOI and wider social issues from macropolicy perspectives, studies by Vai Ramanathan (2005), Maya David and Wendy Tien (2009), Priti Sandhu (2010), and Shaila Sultana (2014a, 2014b) have taken a microperspective. David and Tien's (2009) study in Malaysia included two groups of participants ($N = 83$ in each) of different age groups (<30 and >45 years) who received education through Bahasa Melayu and English, respectively. The study showed that although both groups were patriotic and had a good sense of national identity, the sense of patriotism was stronger for the younger generation who received education through the national language, demonstrating the influence of MOI in one's sense of national belonging. Ramanathan (2005) worked with English- and Gujarati-medium students in Ahmadabad in India, focusing on their social identities. Her research showed that the two groups had different trajectories of academic experiences and learning outcomes, attributable to their differential social backgrounds. Identity construction in relation to MOI is more clearly illustrated in Sandhu's (2010) research in the Indian city of Dehradun. With some minor exceptions, the study showed patterned relationships between MOI on the one hand and self-identification, empowerment, and fulfillment of material and nonmaterial desires on the other. Finally, Sultana's (2014a, 2014b) interactive sociolinguistics research on English-medium students in Bangladesh illustrates heteroglossic language use by these students whose identities draw on both local and global elements.

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[1] See, e.g., Pietikainen (2003); Hernández (2008); Li (2009); Alhamdan et al. (2014).

[2] See, e.g., Apple (1992); Luke (1995); Kanno (2003); Liu (2005).

Although these studies have generated important insights into identity vis-à-vis MOI, they do not shed light on the contested nature of identity in the context of tensions between global and local languages as MOI and the politics of language and nationalism. Building on these studies, this article explores how two groups of Bangladeshi students belonging to two MOI systems constructed different identities for themselves and for their *other* and how these contrastive identities are used to maintain social divisions in global and local terms. Based on our analysis of newspaper data of MOI debates, we put forward two arguments. First, discursive identity politics may not be characterized exclusively in essentialist or nonessentialist terms but may actually draw on both, depending on whether the representation is of self or other. Second, although medium of instruction is inextricably linked to social divides, the origin of the divides may lie in the social rather than the discursive space. The article illuminates the educational and social consequences of the interplay of language and identity in a globalized world in the local context of Bangladesh.

Context

Bangladesh is a postcolonial nation of over 160 million people in South Asia. More than one-third of its population is illiterate. Sociohistorical, cultural, and political dynamics have given rise to a complex education system in the country comprising three parallel streams. First, there is a secular stream called "general education," which caters to over 80 percent of the school-aged population. Bangla (aka Bengali), the national language spoken by 98 percent of the population, is the MOI in this stream (see Hossain and Tollefson 2007; Hamid 2009). This education constitutes the mainstream and comprises schools of high, average, as well as low quality, depending on their location (e.g., metropolitan, regional, or rural contexts). Children's family socioeconomic status determines the quality of the school that they attend. The second is a religious stream called "*madrasa* education," which accommodates over 17 percent of the student population. This stream embodies the religious identity of the people who joined the Islamic Federation of Pakistan at the end of British colonial rule in 1947. Third, there is English medium (EM) education, first introduced during British colonial rule and currently provided by private schools mainly in metropolitan areas, which neither follows a national curriculum nor requires government finance. This stream caters for 1 to 2 percent of the school-aged children who belong to the wealthier section of the society. Our focus in this article is on the BM (Bangla medium) and EM streams attended by BM and EM students, respectively.[3]

The question of language posed one of the earliest threats to the future of Pakistan as a federation comprising West Pakistan and East Pakistan (currently Bangladesh). The Pakistani rulers' insistence on Urdu as the sole state language was responsible for the Language Movement of 1952, which led East Pakistanis to sacrifice their lives to protect their "mother tongue," Bangla (Musa 1996). Bangla emerged as a symbol of a new identity and source of inspiration in their struggle for freedom from Pakistani rule. However, although questions of the state language shook the foundation of the federation, English and EM schools remained unaffected by the political turmoil.

The cessation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 saw a significant shift in the status of English. Bangla became the key source of national identity (Thomson 2007), and it was imperative on Bangladeshis to respect Bangla and the martyrs of the Language Movement. The institutionalization of Bangla in government and education reduced the role of English, which was conceptualized as being in opposition to Bangla (Hamid 2009).

Although EM education is not formally a part of the national education system, the government has allowed EM schools to operate (Chakraborti 2002). At the time of Independence, there were only a few EM schools, operating exclusively in Dhaka. However, their number has increased since the early 1980s in reaction to government measures to upgrade the status of Bangla at the expense of English and in response to the growing importance of English in a globalizing world (Hamid 2009). In 2005, it was estimated that there were 2,000 EM schools in the country (Banu 2005). Although statistics are not available, the number of these schools has increased dramatically over the past years, with a current estimated total enrollment of between 300,000 and 500,000 students.

EM schools follow the UK-based General Certificate of Education curriculum for "O" and "A" level examinations, which are conducted by the

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[3] Throughout the article we use "writers" to refer to school students and graduates of the EM and BM systems. We use "students" or "graduates" when a distinction between them is intended.

British Council in Dhaka. The system is “totally different and isolated from the nationally accepted curriculum” (Chakraborti 2002, 238; translated by authors). Names given to these schools (e.g., Oxford International, Maple Leaf, Scholastica, and Green Herald) portray a particular social identity that does not conform to the local linguistic and cultural milieu. The nonlocal curriculum has little room for local history or culture, although Bangla is taught as a second language to students who are, ironically, its “native” speakers (Hamid 2006).

The operation of elitist EM schools exclusively for children from well-off families in a linguistically sensitive and socioeconomically volatile polity has given rise to endless EM-BM debates in the country. Hence, it is common to find Letters to the Editor and other commentary on EM schools in English and Bangla newspapers. In 2002, the popular EM-BM topic gave rise to a national debate that originated from a language policy decision taken by Notre Dame College in Dhaka and was enacted in the *Daily Star,* an English-medium newspaper in Bangladesh.[4] In that year the college presented the questions on the Year 11–12 admission test entirely in Bangla. This was despite the fact that the test was taken by BM as well as EM students who had completed grade 10 and “O” levels, respectively. Since EM students do not study Bangla as thoroughly as BM students, the former were disadvantaged because, as one EM writer who unwittingly initiated the debate, explained: “The questions were in Bengali, and so were the answers to be which was the biggest problem for students who have passed from English Medium Schools. The problem deteriorates by the Bengali Grammar, which English medium students are *feeble in*” (EM1,[5] emphasis added).

This undiplomatic confession of the “weakness” of EM students in Bangla opened Pandora’s Box. A BM graduate located in Canada interpreted EM writers’ inadequate Bangla competence as a national concern and invited the authorities to further investigate the matter: “Does this mean that the English Medium students don’t know Bengali? This is a very grim picture. We have to know English, as well as get education in English to cope with the pace of the world. But neglecting our own language! The authority concerned should look into the syllabus of English medium schools in this regard” (BM1).

BM1 drew on the shared knowledge and history of Bangla, the Language Movement, and the unwritten civic obligation of Bangladeshis to acquire Bangla to a high standard. The writer brought EM writers’ identities into focus, questioning their proficiency in Bangla and their sense of patriotism.

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[4] Available at http://www.thedailystar.net.

[5] We use EM/BM followed by a number (e.g., EM1 . . . EM29 . . . EM32, BM1 . . . BM2 . . . BM25) to refer to letters written by EM/BM writers. We use the label to refer to the letter (text), as well as the writer.

In response, EM writers protested and asserted their own identities: "Some people just need a chance to sling mud on English medium students. They would make up false stories and do anything to degrade *us* [. . .] It all started with one person questioning the Notre Dame College authority about its admission system. But none of the *anti-English medium people* could clarify his point" (EM4, emphasis added).

These EM-BM letters turned the media space into a site for discursive identity battles in which the two groups constructed positive representations of themselves and negative representations of their other, setting up a clear *us-them* divide. In doing so they referred to discourses of language, globalization, identity, citizenship, education, and educational outcomes. This article examines these polarized discourses as constructed and reconstructed by the two groups to explore the potential of a more nuanced dialogue between the two sides beyond the discursive stasis. In doing this, we illustrate the macro-micro connections—how larger issues of history, language politics, and socioeconomics are played out in language use and identity construction. Thus, our analysis provides local manifestations of how globalization affects language, identity, and social harmony.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

We deploy an integrated framework drawing on several theoretical perspectives to understand the contested identity representations of the two groups. First, postcolonial theory (Said 1978) helps us understand how EM and BM writers represented themselves positively against a set of constructed characteristics imposed on their other in very much the same way as colonizers represented their own superiority by constructing an imaginary other. This theory is also relevant because the discursive identity struggle centers on and is carried out through English, the ex-colonial language, which was used as an ideological tool to divide the colonizer and the colonized. Second, given the self-other binaries underlying postcolonial theory, we rely on poststructuralist views that consider identity as multiple, fluid, and always emerging, and identity construction as struggles of people of differential power relations.[6] Within this framework, the concept of *social positioning* (Davies and Harré 1990; Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001; Wortham 2004), defined as a discursive act of attributing identities (Wortham 2004), helps us understand the processes of identity formation shaped by language and schooling. Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990) discuss two kinds of positioning: reflexive and interactive. The former involves self-identification, which is often positive, while the latter involves other-identification, which is often negative. The classification is comparable to Teun van Dijk's (2006) notions of "positive self-presentation" and "negative other-representation." Reflexive and interactive identifications hardly ever go unchallenged, and therefore identity representation becomes a site of "identity battles" (Lin 2008). Finally, we use Pierre Bourdieu's (1986, 1991) concepts of capital and symbolic struggle to explicate the process of *othering* by the two groups with differential economic and linguistic resources. Drawing on these diverse conceptualizations of identity enables us to explore alternatives to the "us-them" divides represented by the discourses of the two MOI groups.

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[6] See Bhaba (1994); Norton (2000); Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001); Block (2007); Lin (2008).

Data Source and Selection

Media representation has been widely used as a basis for representing people and their identities.[7] Specific to the present study, EM or BM identity of the writers was clearly articulated in the letters, as can be seen from the following extract: "We are deemed as brats of well-off families who attend expensive private schools and go abroad for higher education and permanently settle there. We are unfairly blamed for brain drain" (EM33).

Although we acknowledge that this particular data source may not be free from potential bias (e.g., only a privileged and passionate group irrespective of MOI backgrounds may have contributed to the newspaper), analyzing letters to the editor can be considered an "unobtrusive measure" (Webb et al. 1966). This is convincing because the writers wrote the letters voluntarily to express their personal and group voices. What is particularly interesting about the data set is that although the BM-EM debate had a central focus on the national language, which is a sensitive issue in the country, it is ironic that the debate was carried out in English, in an English daily. Importantly, letters on the BM-EM debates are not found in Bangla newspapers, probably because many EM students do not subscribe to these papers and are also probably less confident about writing letters in Bangla (see Sultana 2014b). On the other hand, the BM writers may have been "privileged" students, since they were articulate and confident enough to write letters to an English newspaper. However, in our view, the value of the letters as a source of spontaneous and unsolicited data outweighed a potential bias.

We based our analysis on 66 letters to the Editor of the *Daily Star*. This newspaper has a special relationship with English medium schools and their students, which can be understood from the fact that every year the paper gives awards to high-performing EM students by organizing a grand ceremony.[8] Although news stories on English medium schools are occasionally published in all Bangla and English newspapers, only two other English dailies including the *Independent* and the *New Age* have published a few letters on English medium schools in the past decade.

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[7] See Pietikainen (2003); Hernández (2008); Li (2009); Alhamdan et al. (2014).

Our analysis considered BM-EM letters published in the *Daily Star* from 2002 to 2011 (see the appendix). However, we were particularly interested in the August 2002–July 2005 timeframe because all the EM-BM letters related to the Notre Dame College incident were published during this period. Although there were other letters on the topic, our corpus, selected from a collection of 81 letters on the basis of their relevance to identity issues, was sufficient to reach a saturation point in terms of the focus of our analysis.[9] Thirty-four of these letters were written by 33 EM writers (EM4 and EM26 were written by the same author), 28 by BM writers, while the language-medium background of four writers (NK1, NK2, NK3, and NK4) was unidentifiable. About 80 percent of the writers were located in Bangladesh at the time of writing. Of the 20 percent of writers who wrote from overseas (US, UK, Canada, Australia, and Malaysia), the majority were EM writers. Most of the letters were published under such threads as “English medium students in trouble” and “Of Bangla and English” (see the appendix). Although a chain (i.e., who responded to whom) was evident in the early stages of the debate, gradually the writers contributed without referring to particular writers.

While the two groups positioned themselves in the debate in line with their language-medium identities (EM or BM), the unidentified writers were found to have taken up the role of moderators. For instance, for NK2 while it was “undoubtedly true that some English medium students try to be more English than the British,” it was also the case that “students of Bangla medium schools are much weaker in English than English medium ones.” That EM writers in general had a higher level of competence in English than BM writers was also reflected, although not to the fullest extent, in the letters. For instance, EM writers in general wrote longer letters than BM writers—the longest one being written by EM12 (over 700 words) and the shortest one by BM25 (90 words). Stylistically, the EM letters demonstrated a natural flow, eloquence, and idiomaticity that were lacking in the BM letters. Nevertheless, the latter group was not representative of the generally English-incompetent BM population (see Hamid and Baldauf 2008); rather, they constituted a select group who had amassed sufficient linguistic and cultural capital to contribute letters to the editor of an English-medium newspaper.

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[8] Please refer to http://www.thedailystar.net/ode-to-brilliance-18902.

[9] The newspaper went online in 2003. The majority of the letters were published in 2002, and we tried to collect as many letters as we could from the printed version. There must have been many more letters sent to the editor. However, on September 18, 2002, the editor decided not to publish these letters “Due to lack of space and our commitment to include as many topics as possible.”

Data Analytical Framework

Although critical discourse analysis (CDA)[10] appears to be an obvious choice for exploring EM-BM identity discourses, we combined CDA with qualitative content analysis (Dörnyei 2007) as our analytical framework. Because CDA requires detailed analyses of content and form at the micro-, meso-, and macrolevels, it is not suitable for analyzing a large volume of texts (Fairclough 2003, 2010; van Dijk 2009). For Norman Fairclough (1995), the microlevel mainly concerns the text's syntax and metaphoric structure; the mesolevel concerns the text's production and consumption; and the macrolevel concerns the wider social issues. However, our aim in this study was to analyze the major variables that the two groups resorted to in constructing identities reflexively and interactively so that we could demonstrate the discursive divide between them in as much detail as possible. In looking for instances of identity discourses, we were guided by van Dijk's (1988, 2009) model of text analysis that allowed us to conduct a context-mediated topical and microlevel analysis, although there was no scope for doing the latter extensively. Following Norman Fairclough's (2003, 2010) three-dimensional framework comprising text, discursive practice, and social practice, we highlighted the production of texts (see the Context section) and referred to wider social issues to explain the discourses. Thus, CDA helped us to achieve some kind of social analysis of a social problem that had a linguistic manifestation (Fairclough 2010).

We relied on the content analytical technique of constantly moving between the manifest and the latent level of text (Dörnyei 2007) to capture examples of identity representation. For example, while EM students were often explicit about certain aspects of EM identity, (e.g., "*We* have a satisfactory knowledge of Bengali" [EM9]), they also made only implicit reference to particular aspects of identity, requiring a latent level analysis referring to the social context (see the Findings section). We read each letter and labeled it an EM or a BM, depending on whether the writer went to EM or BM school. We highlighted specific instances of identification using a framework (fig. 1) that showed how the two groups constructed identities for themselves and their other.

We grouped all instances of identification under the categories of: (*a*) BM other (EM)-identification, (*b*) EM self-identification, and (*c*) EM other (BM)-identification. The category of BM self-identification is missing

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[10] see, e.g., van Dijk (1988, 2009); Fairclough (1989, 2003, 2010); and Wodak and Meyer (2009).

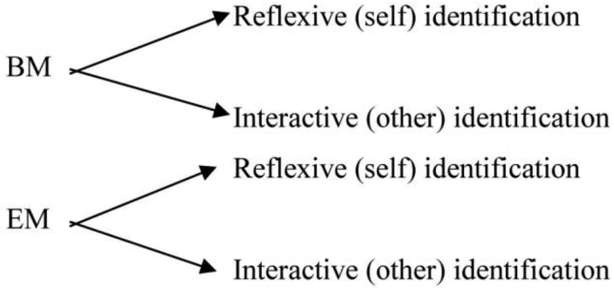
BM
Reflexive (self) identification
Interactive (other) identification
EM
Reflexive (self) identification
Interactive (other) identification

FIG. 1.—Analytical framework for reflexive and interactive identification

from our analysis because the letters did not refer to BM identity, which is taken as a given because BM constitutes the mainstream in the society. For instance, in a previously cited extract BM1 questioned: “Does this mean that English medium students don’t know Bengali?” While BM1 appreciated the importance of English for Bangladeshis, s/he also exclaimed: “But neglecting our own language!” In accepting the EM identity, BM1 still keeps BM as a reference point, as an unquestioned given. That BM people “know Bangla” and do not “neglect” their own language does not require discursive legitimacy, and therefore this identity is not discussed in the letters.

Our examination of the discourses showed a “rift between Bengali and English based students” (EM18). Although we argue that this discursive “rift” reflected the social divide outside the discourse, we highlight its discursive (re)construction, which gave distinct identities, both self-constructed and imposed, to the two groups as a result of their academic socialization through the EM or BM systems.

Findings

BM Other (EM)-Identification

BM writers constitute the mainstream of Bangladeshi society whose values and ideals are reflected in the national identity. Thus, they were in a favorable position to impose identities on EM writers with legitimacy. This advantage explains why EM writers defended their own identities as Bangladeshis, while BM writers played the identity game offensively because they did not have to construct or defend their identities which, as previously mentioned, were part of established Bangladeshi identity. BM writers constructed EM identities in such as a way as to prove that the latter were not Bangali/Bangladeshi. In so doing, they provided an essentialist definition of Bangladeshi identity, which is unimaginable without Bangla or without one’s love of and loyalty to Bangladesh.

The dominant discourse constructed by BM writers for their *other* referred to the latter's weakness in Bangla, which was a recurrent theme in the BM letters (BM1, BM2, BM3, BM7, BM12, BM14, BM16, BM19, and BM27). The discourse assumed the existence of an ideal Bangla speaker with whom EM writers were compared and found deficient. This deviation from the ideal norm was indicated by discourses such as EM writers "don't know Bangla" or were "weak in Bangla" (BM1), had poor knowledge of Bangla (BM7), or did not know Bangla well (BM17). These evaluations would appear legitimate to the reader given the prevailing sociopolitics of Bangla (Hamid 2011a). A nation, whose dominant discourses suggest that national identity is based on the national language, may not permit its people to take the language less than seriously. This interpretation can also be derived from the following BM letter, which referred to EM education as a national "misfortune": "Maybe all the nations in the world feel proud to speak and be educated in their mother tongue. It is our misfortune that we are somewhat indifferent to our own language that has posed a question on the performances of the English medium students of our country in the mother tongue" (BM7).

In this loaded excerpt, while a strong appeal is made for mother tongue education from a nationalistic perspective, BM7 suppresses the fact that Bangla is the MOI in the national curriculum. English-medium schools are attended by just about 2 percent of the student population, which probably does not have a significant impact on the national MOI policy. If mother tongue education is an issue, it is for the ethnic minority groups in the country (see Rahman 2010), who are not mentioned in this debate. The use of "we" as a group identity marker can be related to this issue. Apparently, BM7 refers to an inclusive "we" that seeks the unity of BM and EM, without creating a division between them. But as we have just noted, the "we" does not include minority groups.

However, the debate was not just about language; it was about what language stood for. In other words, language was used as a proxy for issues of identity and identity politics (Suleiman 2006). For instance, EM writers' poor knowledge of Bangla was equated with "neglect" of Bangla (BM1), which is seen almost as a seditious act in Bangladesh, although this knowledge for BM writers was taken for granted. EM writers' neglect of Bangla was found in their "strange Bengali accent" (BM2) or "odd accent" (BM12) (see also Sultana 2014b for examples), which may damage the "purity" of Bangla represented as part of "one of the richest heritage and culture in the world" (BM6). The language is also polluted by EM writers' deliberate mixture of Bangla and English: "For many of the English Medium students, it is not 'cool' to converse in Bangla, nor is it 'practical' to speak English alone. So they end up speaking a language in which, out of five sentences three are in English, two are in Bengali" (BM3).

Although Bangla-English code-mixing is characteristic of educated Bangla speech (Alam 2006), when this language behavior was observed in EM writers it was given a semilingual representation—half-Bangla and half-English. This language-based identity crisis (fully speaking neither Bangla nor English) was represented as affecting EM writers' national identity: since they were not fully proficient in Bangla, they were not true Bangladeshis. That is why they looked toward the West for everything—language, higher education, culture, entertainment, worldviews, employment, and "home"—at the expense of everything Bangladeshi. This idea was represented by BM4: "those who study in those schools [EM] use them as stepping stones to go abroad. These are little bits of 'foreign land' where people get ready to leave Bangladesh. Why spend so much time talking about people to whom the destination from day one is the airport and instead of reading Bengali classics, they are busy polishing their fake foreign '*uccharon*' [pronunciation]."

Lexical choices including "abroad," "foreign land," and "foreign pronunciation" convey a sense of (voluntary) abandonment of the motherland by EM writers while a territorial bonding is implied for BM writers for the purpose of othering. However, language in these discourses is a surrogate for national identity because it is argued that English education leads EM writers to migrate to the West, initially for studies and ultimately for permanent residence (BM3, BM4, BM5, BM6, BM13, BM15, BM18, and BM20), leaving behind their national identity. Attending EM schools means preparing for a life trajectory that ends in settling abroad (BM3 and BM20). Unsurprisingly, therefore, they learn more about the West than about Bangladesh: "Many of their books are from the UK and they follow the syllabus of the UK domestic schools. So they have to study the life of Shakespeare, Joan of Arc or King James but ignoring the story of Nazrul, Tagore, or Lalon Shah" (BM16).[11]

While BM16 rightly points out the absence of local cultural knowledge in the EM curriculum (see Al Quaderi and Al Mamun 2010), what is missed out is that BM students are also deprived of the knowledge of Shakespeare or other classics.

The territorial detachment indicated in the previous paragraph combines with the untying of cultural moorings, denoted by divided literary and cultural choices of the two groups: Shakespeare, Joan of Arc, and King James versus Nazrul, Tagore, and Lalon Shah. The consequences are assumed to be predictable: "We are producing Western-oriented children, who later become very keen for further studies in the West. The spirit of nationalism and culture is eroded, or the base is not strong enough. Later many of these youth do not wish to return to their homeland, as the anchoring is missing or weak" (BM18).

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[11] Nazrul is the national poet, Tagore is a Nobel laureate in Bangla literature, and Lalon Shah is a renowned folksinger and philosopher.

Although BM writers' settling abroad was not considered problematic from a national identity point of view, the migration of the latter group was perceived as a manifestation of their unpatriotic feelings. BM writers including BM4, BM5, BM13, BM15, and BM20 believed that EM writers migrated abroad voluntarily, as indicated powerfully by the metaphor "abandoning" and thus displayed unpatriotic behavior: "Their abandoning the country or working in the private sector for better prospects at this stage does not signify much patriotism" (BM15).

Implicitly, BM writers represented themselves as guardians of the nation who suggested ways in which EM people could serve the country or its economy: "The statistics in civil service, Bangladesh Army show almost no English medium educated personnel. Because they will not be financially very solid in such services, they opt to join highly paid jobs in private sector or multinationals or in the first chance migrate to developed countries" (BM13).

It is argued that to be a Bangladeshi one has to make a sacrifice (see Liu [2005] for similar discourses in Chinese textbooks), even if this sacrifice means incurring financial hardship by taking up low-paid jobs in the public sector. Because EM people do not consider this option, they were represented as unpatriotic, having little to contribute to nation building. What is ignored in this representation is the fact that it is foreign remittance (together with the income from the garment industry) that keeps the Bangladeshi economy moving.

EM Self-Identification

Placed in a defensive position in the discursive identity debate, EM writers constructed a positive group identity while at the same time imposing essentialist identities on their BM counterparts. If BM writers mobilized dominant national discourses in their favor, EM writers were able to exert their social elitism, social capital (i.e., connections with political power), and linguistic capital.

Characteristic of the EM defense was the projection of a strong group identity with shared views, beliefs, and identities. This internal coherence was denoted by micro- linguistic choices such as the use of pronouns ("we" and "us," superseding "I" and "me"; e.g., EM4, EM6, EM7, EM9, EM11, EM14, EM16, EM17, and EM33). The following are a few examples:

- "These letters portray *us* 'fast,' 'ultramodern,' 'suffering from superiority complex,' and on top of all 'unpatriotic.'" (EM17)
- "Mr. [name] needs to know more about *our system* before asserting his views." (EM26)

- "It appalls me that people are so ready to write *us* off in this bigoted fashion." (EM9)
- "Some people have constantly criticized *us*, the English medium students for NO reason." (EM14)

Projecting unity and group solidarity by means of linguistic resources, EM writers argued that there must be something wrong with BM writers who are trying to "write them off" for no reason. The lexical choices indicate the self-other divide: EM writers were associated with "superiority complex" while BM writers with "bigotry."

Self as global.—EM writers represented themselves as global citizens with cosmopolitan values. They were "products" (EM13 and EM24) of EM education, which had "groomed" them well for a global destination (EM5). First, they received a "good education" (EM2, EM3, EM5, EM12, EM14, and EM24) from EM schools. Although a detailed picture of this education was not provided, two key characteristics were put forward. The first characteristic was the level of English proficiency attained by EM writers, many of whom might not be distinguished from native speakers of English. This linguistic achievement is often regarded as synonymous with a "good education" (see Lin 1999; Sandhu 2010). Related to this, EM writers developed an acute sense of "the worldliness of English" (Pennycook 1994a) and argued that it was unbecoming for Bangladesh not to appreciate the value of a global language: "Living in a third world country and depending on the West, for almost everything, we cannot ignore the importance of English, whether one likes it or not" (EM5).

The second characteristic of the good education in question referred to critical thinking. This was regarded as missing from BM education (EM12 and EM24), since the latter is characterized by rote learning, the absence of critical thinking, and failure in English learning. Implicitly, EM writers related their schooling to Western academic culture, dissociating themselves from the Oriental tradition (see Kubota 1999; Ramanathan 2002).

For EM writers, the quality of education provided by EM schools served not only as a defense of their own identity but also as a discursive strategy to *other* BM writers who, it is implied, receive a poor education in a local language, which instills parochialism (see the next subsection). In contrast, EM writers described themselves as being guided by liberal values underlying a cosmopolitan identity and emphasized those values in countering BM (mis) representations: "They [BM] need to stop making stupid tales regarding us. Don't they have anything better to do than to investigate what kind of clothes English-medium girls wear or what kind of accent they . . . use? We have been brought up with a *certain degree of freedom* and we revel in it. If there is any lack of propriety, it's from these so-called supporters of Bengali language" (emphasis added).

The "freedoms" that characterized an EM upbringing are not elaborated, but plausibly the reference is to Western values that set EM families apart from the mainstream that suffers from "bigotry." Probably EM children internalize this freedom from family socialization, which is compatible with school values (see Lin 1999), leading EM parents to "insist that their children study in English based schools where they will be safe [and] that their children will be able to learn about values and principles and also good education" (EM14). Such values are not just missing from the BM (national) system; it is argued that the BM system actually propagated "close-minded ideas" that "hinder" EM youth in "their future endeavours" (EM24). EM schools are perceived to be doing their job well since their students leave school as "proud products," qualified for global competition: "I am a product of the English medium education available in Dhaka. The education enabled me to compete on an equal footing with my peers around the world. This education not only prepares us for higher studies, but it also prepares us in a way that we outshine students of other countries in academia around the world" (EM24).

Predictably, EM writers would migrate to the West, which, it is argued, was a default choice. EM writers argued that this was because Bangladeshi rulers, who are educated in the BM system, had brought the country to such a state that its "only recognition in the world is that we are one of the most corrupt countries, we are poverty stricken and we often suffer from natural calamities" (EM30). As EM29 explained:

> Actually, it [settling abroad] is true. And the reason behind this migrating mentality of most of the English medium students is—the complete mess that the older generations of our sonar Bangladesh has left us in.[12] Yes, dear sirs, who call us unpatriotic, over smart and whatnot the bloopers made by you are now giving us no other choice but to migrate to other countries, and now it is you who are blaming us for migrating! Well, please stop blaming us, take good care of our country while you can, and then maybe we will have second thoughts when applying for colleges and universities abroad.

"*Absentee patriots.*"—EM writers not only denied the charge of being unpatriotic but also asserted their patriotism by referring to a unique service that they offered Bangladesh from abroad. In doing so, they received the ironic label "absentee patriots" from BM writers. EM writers claimed that they contributed to the country by building its image abroad through their academic and professional success (EM11, EM17, EM19, EM22, EM24, and

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[12] Literally, golden Bangla. The ironic reference is to the national anthem written by Tagore, which starts with "My golden Bangla."

EM26). For instance, EM17 wrote: “This year alone EMS students from Bangladesh got admitted to Oxford, Cambridge, Dartmouth, Harvard, Cornell, Amherst, Vassar, and many other famous educational institutes of UK, USA, Australia, etc.”

By garnering this academic recognition, EM writers “brought Bangladesh to the forefront of academia” (EM24) and therefore, “[o]ur nation should be proud that these English medium students go abroad and flourish the image of Bangladesh” (EM19). EM22 clarified that EM writers “often use their edge in English to present Bangladesh’s case to the locals, the media and policy makers [abroad].” Given this global image-building work, it was unthinkable to these “representative[s] of Bangladesh” (EM22) abroad that BM writers, instead of appreciating their achievement (EM26) and contribution, should engage in EM “bashing” (EM17).

EM Other (BM)-Identification

While constructing favorable identities for themselves, EM writers imposed identities on BM writers referring to their (*a*) low level of English proficiency, (*b*) parochial ideas and values, (*c*) inability to see beyond the local context, and (*d*) fixed destiny of remaining eternally local.

EM discourses showed that whereas EM graduates were proud products of EM education, BM writers were pitiable victims of a substandard education that, in their view, emphasized rote learning and knowledge banking at the expense of creativity and critical thinking (EM2). In particular, limited English proficiency, a typical outcome of this education, was considered unforgivable: “That today even a masters passed student from University (from a Bengali medium background), cannot speak in decent English (with few exceptions of course)” (EM5).

Although BM writers do manifest some deficiencies in English, as pointed out by EM5 and documented elsewhere (see Hamid and Baldauf 2008), EM writers dramatized their inability to “speak in decent English” (EM5) or write in “proper English” (EM10). The implication is BM English was a local, Bangladeshi product, while EM English followed the British or US variety. As EM9 asserted: “We, English medium students pronounce English words the way we have been taught by our teachers or as specified in the pronunciation guides in the Oxford dictionary.”

EM7 provided a concrete example and suggested that EM and BM English were underpinned by two different models: “While the Bengali Medium students will say that ‘The teacher took a test today,’ the English Medium students will say that, ‘The teacher gave a test today.’ ”

Thus, BM writers were thought to possess poor and deficient English, compared to EM writers’ Standard English. Although EM writers acknowledged that they did not have “a strong foothold of Bangla” (EM20), they were defended by one EM writer arguing that they were proficient enough to communicate with "ordinary people": "Most of us have enough knowledge about our mother tongue to communicate with the ordinary people of our country, but do most of the Bengali medium students have enough knowledge in English to communicate with the rest of the world?" (EM16).

EM16 invited BM writers to question themselves (before they questioned EM people's Bangla) in order to ascertain whether they were fully equipped "to communicate with the rest of the world."

EM discourses suggested that BM writers were not only ill-equipped, but they were also incapable of appreciating the reality of English in a globalized world. Their limited English ability and BM institutions' failure to develop this ability were seen as evidence of their ignorance or inability to appreciate the value of English. It was pointed out that BM writers might take pride in Bangla, but education through Bangla was informed by "a misguided zeal" (EM10), which denied the value of English and rendered their linguistic pride a false pride.

Discussion

In this article we have analyzed the construction, imposition, and defense of identities in letters to the editor related to MOI in Bangladeshi school systems. As our analysis has illustrated, identity construction was a site of discursive struggle in which the two groups constructed multiple discourses of self and other, creating a divide between EM and BM writers. Following the work of Bessle Mitsikopoulou (2007) in Greece on English, technological literacy, and development, the EM-BM identities can be placed under two overarching discourses of local and global orientations. With local schooling, national language proficiency, limited English, and emphasis on local norms and values, BM writers were represented as having a local orientation. On the other hand, EM writers with Western education, English proficiency, global consciousness, and willingness to engage with their "imagined communities" (see Norton 2000; Kanno and Norton 2003; Gao 2012) in the West demonstrated a global orientation. Although EM writers resisted BM discourses that represented them as nonlocal and non-Bangladeshi, they reasserted their own identity with a global orientation. As EM9 wrote: "We've just had a different orientation that does not make us better or worse or snobby or otherwise, only slightly different." The emphasis is on their *difference* from the mainstream, an example of what Suleiman (2006, 51) calls "[a]n assumption of alterity, the fact that it is not possible to posit identity without speaking of difference, of otherness." This distinctive self-identification has its roots in the different orientations of the two groups. As EM9 elaborated: "The only difference between us [EM and BM] is that we have a different perspective, we have heard of Harvard and Princeton and dream about going to study in those schools just like a student in a remote village in Madaripur [a district town] dreams of going to Dhaka University. We all dream big, whether we are students of Green Herald [an EM school in Dhaka] or a public school in a remote village. It is only the magnitude of our dreams and aspirations, which are different. So, condemn us for it."

Ironically, the EM-BM "difference," despite EM9's attempt at rhetorical minimization, is far from trivial because it referred to their orientations in life and described the limits of their imagination (see Kanno and Norton 2003). Whereas the BM dream is limited to the University of Dhaka, a *local* institution, the EM dream has no geographic bounds since their imagined communities are associated with Harvard and Princeton, which were perceived as the best universities *globally*. This suggests that not only people's current engagement but also their imagined future is subject to discursive contest. In other words, people's other not only represents who they are *now* but also who they can be *in the future*—insights that research on imagined identities needs to take into account.[13]

The BM-EM debate illustrates how the interplay of English (the global language), Bangla (the national language), and identity in the era of globalization unfolds in a local context and whether and to what extent the relevant theoretical concepts can explicate questions of language, identity, and social division. For instance, the BM-EM discursive battle relates to identification in spatial terms, complicating national identity construction in a globalizing world. Pennycook (2010) argues that given the potential of locating one's imagined community beyond the border, national identity may be somewhat less relevant than transnational identity (see also Sultana 2014a; Sung 2014). However, as their vehement protests to BM discourses indicated, EM graduates, even when they were settled in the West, were unwilling to compromise their Bangladeshi identity. For BM writers living abroad, the likelihood of giving up Bangladeshi identity was not even contemplated because their attachment to the land and the language was taken for granted. Thus, from the perspective of the local context, globalization may lead to a redefinition of the connection between territoriality and nationality. Hence, self-withdrawal from the *site* of one's national identity does not signify that one has to give up claims to this identity since it is possible to keep "shuttling between communities" (Canagarajah 2005), old and new.

However, neither groups fully acknowledged the possibility of deterritorialized national identity. Each group saw its own identity in nonessentialist ways, but the other group's identity in essentialist ways. For instance, while BM discourses claimed that EM writers were less patriotic (therefore, less Bangladeshi) because they migrated abroad or were less proficient in Bangla, EM discourses assigned BM writers a local identity without the possibility of global mobility. In such contexts where identity is contested, it is impossible to assess which group is more or less patriotic and to what extent the national language can be called a sponsor of national identity (see David and Tien 2009). In this interactive context, both groups followed essentialist views in their projected relationships to different variables related to identity. Neither group deconstructed the myth of Bangladeshi identity. It was taken as a given that a Bangladeshi must speak Bangla, nurture a particular set of values, and live (and die) in Bangladesh. Even in their staunchest defense against BM (mis)representations, no EM writers pointed out that one did not become less Bangladeshi by staying abroad or not speaking Bangla as fluently as an idealized speaker. This is an interesting aspect of discursive identity politics: self-identification is allowed hybrid possibilities but the same possibilities are denied to other-identification by both groups of identity-constructors. Thus, this specific context both substantiates and challenges essentialist as well as nonessentialist (i.e., poststructuralist) identities, underscoring the strong influence of the local history and the discourses of national language and identity on both groups of writers.

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[13] See, e.g., Norton (2000); Kanno (2003); Kanno and Norton (2003); Gao (2012).

In highlighting both groups' essentialist views, we do not intend to set up an EM-BM dichotomy and deny the possibility of in-between positions (e.g., Bhaba 1994). Indeed, Sultana's (2014a, 2014b) ethnographic work with English-medium students demonstrates their creative and strategic use of English and Bangla to project hybrid identities. However, there are good reasons that our data have fewer examples of complex positionings compared to Sultana's. Sultana's research focuses on language use in *private*, exclusive spaces, mostly between friends, where neither material resources (e.g., jobs or academic grades) nor sociocultural (social or national) identities were at stake. In contrast, language use in our study takes place in the *public* domain with a significant stake in national identity. Only NK1, NK2, NK3, and NK4 were found to suppress their own language-background and emphasize a hybrid solution—learning English and Bangla equally well (NK1). A *Daily Star* editorial on EM schools published on March 17, 2008, was found to promote similar alternatives to polarized views, taking "a realistic and rational approach": "We are for a realistic and rational approach to the whole issue. The elitist label no longer holds good as it used to. Local cultural and educational ingredients are being integrated into the English medium curriculum. Second, Bangla is being taught in these schools. There is a vast scope though to be more inclusive of local contents that would instill greater attachment to the country. The English taught in Bengali-medium schools should be of comparable standards, neither language being given a short shrift."[14]

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[14] Please see http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=27998.

However, this advocacy for a complex positioning was scarce in the data, which can be explained not only by the private-public distinction but also by the absence of alternative positionality in an education system that does not permit a complex choice—one either goes to EM school or to BM school. In the absence of significant EM-BM interaction within the education system, it can be argued that the two groups existed in different social spaces, as reflected in the discursive divide. This suggests the imperative of creating a common platform for the two groups, beyond the polarized positions, which is currently missing. Media, education policy makers, and intellectuals have a critical role to play in finding ways out of this linguistic/social bifurcation.

How does the discursive (linguistic) *othering* as substantiated in the article relate to the social (material) divides? Can we argue, as some studies have indicated (e.g., Choi 2003; see McKay [2010] for a review), that English is at the root of the social division? A poststructuralist view[15] would emphasize the discursive construction of the divide, denying its existence outside language. Although we do not underestimate the discursive, we would argue that what appears as the EM-BM linguistic divide is actually a manifestation of the divide that already exists between the two groups who possess differential amounts of capital and exist in different social spaces (Bourdieu 1986). As Serajul Choudhury (2001, 16) argues: "[. . .] the [Bangladeshi] state must address itself to the question whether it wants to have a more egalitarian society or to widen the social gulf further, with the knowledge of English acting as a divisive factor."

In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, parents send their children to EM schools because their family cultural capital is compatible with EM schooling (see, e.g., Lin 1999). They expect that the schooling will reinforce this capital. Thus, EM education ensures the continuity of the family/class cultural capital, identity, and status, although EM writers can discursively construct this identity, as they did in the debate, through English. Seen from this perspective, the debate is not about English or Bangla; it is a substitute for other issues that are often left unarticulated (Suleiman 2006). This phenomenon was pointed out by BM4: "The debate on English Medium schools points to the endless debate on privilege and denial." Thus, English in the debate is symbolic in two ways: (*a*) it is a *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu 1991), which can be exchanged for material prosperity and mobility; and (*b*) it is an embodiment of material resources and social privileges that need to be invested to master English but are inequitably distributed in society. Prevailing social attitudes directed toward EM education, which are characterized by social xenophobia, are actually directed toward this privilege, elitism, and power manifested through English.

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[15] See, e.g., Foucault (1979); Pennycook (1994b); Weedon (1997); Wodak and Mayer (2009); see Holborow (1999) for a critique.

Nevertheless, the BM-EM debate cannot be taken as an accurate representation/reconstruction of the reality on the ground. Although the discursive debate can be legitimately linked to the social, as we have done in the article, it can also be argued that the battle is fought only at an *ideological* level, without implications for BM or EM writers at a *personal* level (see Eggington 2010). In fact, those who participated in this debate—regardless of their MOI backgrounds—belonged to the privileged group in a general sense because they received good education and developed high levels of English proficiency to be able to write to the English daily. If questions of linguistic and social disadvantage are relevant, these are so for (*a*) those millions of BM and madrasa students who fail to develop proficiency in English; (*b*) the minority groups who are disadvantaged in terms of Bangla as well as English; and (*c*) the uneducated millions who do not have the opportunity to go to school or learn English. Neither the BM nor EM writers participating in the debate can represent these groups whose demographic dominance does not have a representation in the discourse of education, English, globalization, and identity. In this sense, the ideological BM-EM debate can be seen as being detached from the actual context of social denial and inequality.

Conclusion

The global spread of English and the discourses of English and globalization (e.g., Crystal 1997) in a text-saturated social order have led to an extraordinary emphasis being placed on the linguistic capital of English for individual and social mobility (Tsui and Tollefson 2007; Hamid 2010). While the role of discourse and the discursive construction of identity as a kind of "fight for words" (Brown and Ganguly 2003; Lin 2008) cannot be denied, it should be asserted that at the heart of such struggles are social and material issues, which fall along linguistic/discursive lines. In the present article, although English serves as a powerful expression of the social divide, the language itself is not the *raison d'être* of this divide. The semiotic significance of English—as an expression of the divide between privilege and denial—can be traced to British colonial rule, which introduced English to the privileged but denied it to the masses. The popularization of English in the postcolonial context may not have significantly altered the earlier patterns of differential access (Hamid 2011b).

If English reproduces the social divide and carries it forward to be known as a global-local divide, seeking to bridge it through English could be an impossible aim that takes what English can offer for granted but ignores what English learning requires (Hamid 2011b). The recent language policy and planning efforts in Bangladesh have been guided by this mechanism of social justice (Hamid 2011a) to give the disadvantaged “a slice of the [English] cake” (Friedrich 2005, 151). However, it can be argued that such efforts are futile at best given that the EM system can effectively produce English-proficient “products” outside national planning, while the BM system largely fails, despite the planning of the language in education (Hamid and Baldauf 2008).

Importantly, the BM-EM discursive battle provides a false sense of inclusivity that suppresses those social groups who are genuinely disadvantaged, raising questions of who speaks for whom, and who has the power to represent. Although a case of privilege and denial is created between BM and EM writers, the underprivileged groups including linguistic minorities, people without formal literacy, and students with limited English are not represented in the debate.

Our analysis in the article provides insights into the interplay of language, identity, and globalization in the local context of Bangladesh. It illustrates how national policy making in language and education has not only been inadequate to meet social expectations but also has generated unhealthy debates mainly between the privileged, taking attention away from the more legitimate context of denial and inequality. The strong sense of linguistic nationalism focusing on Bangla was expected to guide language policies that could have disrupted colonial continuity in order to build an egalitarian society. However, as we have illustrated in the article, the social/linguistic divides created in the colonial days have strengthened in the recent decades and have taken new forms of expression and inequality. These complex interactions of language, identity, and society are different from those in other contexts such as Greece or Malaysia because of the unique nature of the local discourses of language, nationalism, and national identity. We invite further examination of the (surface) question of language and the deeper issues of identity, inequality, and social struggle as English and globalization penetrate other developing societies like Bangladesh, affecting the linguistic ecology, sociocultural landscape, and socioeconomic reality.

Appendix

TABLE A1
BM-EM LETTERS

Code	Title	Date
EM1	“English Medium students in trouble”	16 August 2002
BM1	“English Medium students in trouble”	19 August 2002
EM2	“English Medium students in trouble”	20 August 2002
BM2, EM3, EM4, EM5	“English Medium students in trouble”	22 August 2002
BM3, BM4, EM6	“English Medium students in trouble”	23 August 2002
BM5	“Absentee patriots”	23 August 2002

EM7	"English Medium students in trouble"	24 August 2002
BM6	"English Medium students in trouble"	25 August 2002
BM7, BM8, EM8, EM9	"English Medium students in trouble"	26 August 2002
EM10	"English Medium students in trouble"	30 August 2002
EM11	"Absentee expatriates and English Medium students in trouble"	29 August 2002
EM12	"English Medium students in trouble"	30 August 2002
BM9, EM13, NK1	"English Medium students in trouble"	30 September 2002
EM14, BM10, NK2	"Of Bangla and English"	4 September 2002
EM31	"Unfairness in judging English medium institutions"	6 September 2002
BM11, EM15, EM16	"Of Bangla and English"	6 September 2002
BM12, EM17	English medium vs. Bangla medium	7 September 2002
EM18	"Of Bangla and English"	8 September
NK3	"Of English and Bangla"	19 September
BM13	"English medium vs. Bangla medium"	10 September 2002
EM19, BM21	"Of Bangla and English"	11 September 2002
EM20	Of English and Bangla-once again!	12 September 2002
BM14, BM15	"Of English and Bangla"	18 September 2002
EM21, EM22	"English vs. Bangla medium and patriotism"	13 September 2002
EM23	"I want to come back"	30 November 2002
BM16	Curriculum for the nation builders of tomorrow	4 December 2002
BM17	21 February	11 March 2005
BM25	Education sector	17 March 2005
BM18	Syllabus—English medium schools	22 July 2004
EM24	English medium education	19 March 2005
BM19	Speaking in Bangla	6 April 2005
EM25	English medium schools	19 March 2005
EM26	Nation builders of tomorrow	19 November 2002
EM27	Nation builders of tomorrow	19 November 2002
BM20	Nation builders of tomorrow	19 November 2002
BM22	Nation builders of tomorrow	19 November 2002
EM27	Nation builders of tomorrow	19 November 2002
EM28	Nation builders of tomorrow	19 November 2002
EM29	Nation builders of tomorrow	19 November 2002
BM23	Role of Bangla	1 June 2005
BM24	ZS's letter	23 March 2005
EM30	In response to O from Brisbane	2 April 2005
EM32	Public schools not competing	25 July 2004
EM33	English medium students	6 September 2009
BM26	A reply to "the deserving and the deprived"	30 November 2008
BM 27	Bengali in English medium schools	10 October 2011
EM34	Plight of English medium students	16 December 2011
NK4	Let them get better education	31 August 2007
BM28	Questions for the BBA admission test	26 November 2010

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