



Promises of English and English Language Learners in Rural Bangladesh

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English has been promoted as a language of hope, desire, and mobility in Bangladesh, as elsewhere in the world. In this article, we investigate how rural students in Bangladesh may relate to these promises of English in seeking escape from rural poverty and disadvantage. We draw on findings and insights from three doctoral studies that were conducted in a disadvantaged region in the north of the country. The three studies engaged with students, teachers, and parents, and captured life, experiences, and struggles of poor students attending poor schools and learning poor English. Bringing the studies together enables a holistic understanding of English learning experiences and outcomes taking into account curricular, non-curricular, familial, and social factors shaping English language pedagogy in the region. We contrast key findings from the studies with the many promises of English that have been articulated by national and global education policies and policy actors. Urban-rural divides in academic achievement in general and English learning in particular have been reported in Bangladesh, as elsewhere. These outcomes challenge us to reflect for whom English works as a linguistic capital and for whom it may be otherwise. We argue for focused policy thinking about English teaching and learning in rural communities in Bangladesh and other developing societies.

বিশ্বের অন্যান্য দেশের মতো বাংলাদেশেও ইংরেজিকে আশা, আকাঙ্ক্ষা ও সামাজিক গতিশীলতার ভাষা হিসেবে প্রচার করা হয়েছে। এই নিবন্ধে আমরা বাংলাদেশের গ্রামীণ শিক্ষার্থীদের দারিদ্র্য এবং সামাজিক প্রতিকূলতা থেকে পরিত্রাণ পাওয়ার ক্ষেত্রে ইংরেজি ভাষা কীভাবে সম্পর্কযুক্ত তা তদন্ত করেছি। এ জন্য আমরা দেশের উত্তরে একটি সুবিধাবঞ্চিত অঞ্চলে পরিচালিত তিনটি ডক্টরাল গবেষণার ফলাফল এবং তার বিশ্লেষণের উপর নির্ভর করেছি। এইসব গবেষণা কর্মের জন্য আমরা ছাত্র-ছাত্রী, শিক্ষক এবং পিতামাতার সাথে সম্পৃক্ত হয়েছিলাম এবং গ্রামীণ অসচ্ছল ছাত্র-ছাত্রীদের অমানসম্পন্ন স্কুলে নিম্নমানের ইংরেজি শেখার জীবন চিত্র, অভিজ্ঞতা ও সংগ্রাম তুলে ধরেছি। এই তিন গবেষণা কর্মকে একত্রিত করার ফলে এই অঞ্চলে ইংরেজি ভাষা অধ্যয়নের অভিজ্ঞতা ও ফলাফলের একটি সামগ্রিক জ্ঞানগর্ভ চিত্র ফুটে উঠেছে। এই জ্ঞানার্জনের ভিত্তি হচ্ছে পাঠ্যক্রমিক, অপাঠ্যক্রমিক, পারিবারিক ও সামাজিক বিষয়াদি যা এতদঞ্চলের ইংরেজি ভাষা শিক্ষাবিদ্যাকে প্রভাবিত করেছে। এইসব গবেষণা কর্ম থেকে প্রাপ্ত মূল ফলাফল গুলিকে আমরা ইংরেজি ভাষার বহুমুখী প্রতিশ্রুতির সাথে সম্পৃক্ত করেছি যে প্রতিশ্রুতিগুলো মূলত জাতীয় ও আন্তর্জাতিক শিক্ষা নীতিতে ও নীতিনির্ধারকগণের আলোচনায় স্থান পেয়েছে। অন্যান্য দেশের মতো বাংলাদেশেও সাধারণভাবে একাডেমিক কৃতিত্ব এবং বিশেষভাবে ইংরেজি ভাষা শেখার সাফল্যের ক্ষেত্রে গ্রাম-শহরের বিভাজন লক্ষণীয়। এরূপ ফলাফল ও উপলব্ধির ফলে আমাদের প্রশ্ন হয় ইংরেজি ভাষা আসলেই কাদের জন্য ভাষিক মূলধন হিসেবে কাজ করে এবং কাদের জন্য এর ফলাফল সম্পূর্ণ বিপরীত। আমরা বলতে চাই যে, বাংলাদেশ সহ অন্যান্য



উন্নয়নশীল দেশের গ্রামীণ জনগোষ্ঠীতে ইংরেজি ভাষা শিক্ষাদান ও শেখার জন্য মনোনিবেশিত নীতি পরিকল্পনার উপর গুরুত্ব আরোপ করা উচিত।

Keywords: Promises of English; English as a human capital; sociology of language learning; urban-rural divide in English learning

Introduction

While COVID-19 brought work, economy, education, and our taken-for-granted social life to an unprecedented disruption globally and things are only slowly becoming normal, there has been a lot of discussion on the educational damage caused by the varying lengths of school closures and other forms of learning disruptions. As expected, this discussion has given priority to different groups of learners who experienced disadvantage due to their socio-economic backgrounds, geographic locations, gender, ethnicity, and migration status (see Hanushek & Woessman, 2020; Popa, 2020). The disadvantage of these various educational and social equity groups was not a discovery during the pandemic. They had been disadvantaged before the global health disaster; they experienced learning disruption more than the privileged groups during the pandemic; and they will carry a heavier burden of learning failure into the post-pandemic world. With a focus on English and English learning, this article seeks attention to the lives and experiences of one disadvantaged group of students in Bangladesh. Despite the many discourses of Bangladesh's recent economic development (Raihan, 2016), many families in rural Bangladesh struggle to arrange three meals a day. These families were also hit hard by the pandemic as many of their income-earners lost their jobs. School-age children in such families may worry more about the basic needs for survival than disrupted education or their educational future. We would like to demonstrate how the many promises of English over the years have bypassed these rural students and their experiences of education and education outcomes. We argue that with a minority of exceptions, the majority of rural poor students have been left behind. We would like to highlight the irreconcilable gaps between the promises of English (Park, 2011) and the reality of these students located on geographic, socioeconomic, and technological margins (see Lie et al., 2022; Sayer, 2018).

We raise these questions of disadvantage and inequality in English learning as local and global policies and discourses of English tend to present English as a panacea and a passport to mobility (see Coleman, 2011; May, 2016; Ricento, 2012, 2018; Sayer, 2018; Seargeant et al., 2017). Such discourses are likely to be revamped in the post-pandemic world, as demand for English is likely to be further enhanced. However, these discourses have remained silent about the requirements for learning English and developing functional proficiency required for instrumental outcomes. How poverty and disadvantage affect schooling and English learning has not received much attention in research. Similarly, although the nexus between social class and English learning is undeniable, social class in relation to applied linguistics and English learning has yet to receive significant discussion (Block, 2014; Butler, Sayer & Huang, 2018; Murphy, 2018). Following the perspective of "sociology of language learning" (Hamid, 2009), this article seeks to illustrate how the promises of English are unlikely to materialise in the life of rural students in Bangladesh and other developing societies. We bring together findings from three doctoral studies conducted in a rural region in the northern part of Bangladesh to highlight struggles of students, teachers and families around English teaching and learning. Although the three studies were informed by different theoretical frameworks and explored different research questions, we bring them together to point to the harsh reality of English learning which needs to be contrasted with the local and global promises of English. Collectively, the key findings from the studies enable a holistic understanding of English learning experiences and outcomes taking into account curricular, non-curricular, familial, and social factors shaping English language pedagogy in the region. The innovative way of integrating the studies not only helps to achieve triangulation of the findings but also presents a comprehensive view of English language learning experiences by rural students. As the aim of this article is to integrate the relevant findings from these doctoral studies to critique the promises of English, it is not guided by any particular methodology as such.

However, each of the studies was guided by its own methodological approach which will be outlined in the relevant sections.

Global and Local Promises of English

The economic promises of English have been globally dominant which are promoted by all those who have stakes in the global ELT industry. If English-speaking nations have constructed English in particular ways to maintain its global spread and demand, governments in English-learning nations have purchased English being convinced of its potential for human capital development, global competitiveness, and national economic development (Hamid, 2016b; Ali & Hamid, 2021). Beyond the level of government, the promises of English have been heavily subscribed by English edu-businesses, teachers of English, parents, and English language learners in various contexts (Hamid & Luo, 2016; Islam et al., 2021). The “English fever” is a real phenomenon in different parts of the world including East Asia (Cho, 2015; see also Song, 2018). English is considered “hard currency” (Nino-Murcia, 2003; see also Sayer, 2018) in South America which has also been associated with all sorts of desires and opportunities in Japan and other parts of the world (Seargeant, 2012). English is often considered a panacea for poverty in Africa and Asia (Coleman, 2011) and an antidote to fundamentalism in the Middle East (Karmani, 2005). English has also been considered an invisible tool for migrants’ access to health, education, employment, and social services in English-speaking migrant societies (Chiswick & Miller, 2004; Piller & Takahashi, 2011).

While such discourses of English have a strong following in Bangladesh, we are particularly interested in the changing policy promises of English in the country. Soon after national independence from Pakistan in 1971, when Bangladesh had an opportunity to get rid of the colonial language in a predominantly Bangla-speaking nation, it decided to retain the colonial legacy for historical reasons on the one hand and to maintain Bangladesh’s connections with the rest of the world on the other. However, this “minimalist” view of English was construed as undermining the global eminence of English (Hamid, 2009). Therefore, new policies were explored for more teaching and learning of the language. The first significant policy promise for all social groups and communities was the introduction of English as a compulsory subject from Year 1 in the early 1990s. Apparently, this landmark example of “English for all” was not only inclusive but was also founded on the principles of social justice and equality (Hamid, 2010). The rationale guiding the policy implied that since English was a language of opportunity, it should be universally available so everyone could take advantage of English in pursuing education and employment goals in life (Hamid, 2011). Nonetheless, the economic promise of English underpinning the universal access policy may not have been explicit enough which has been followed by a clearer articulation in more recent policies under the influence of neoliberalism (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014; Hamid & Rahman, 2019).

In line with the latest national education policy (Ministry of Education, 2010), English language teaching has been geared towards human capital development (Ali & Hamid, 2021). English language skills are considered essential components of this embodied capital which is believed to contribute to economic productivity. This capital is believed to transform students into productive human capital who can find employment in local and global job markets (Lie et al., 2022). English language education has, therefore, gone through the process of “economization” (Spring, 2015), as learning outcomes have been aligned with job-market demands. In 2012, the English language curriculum was set to achieve this economization goal which can be understood from the curriculum policy:

[T]he curriculum focuses on teaching-learning English as a skill-based subject so that learners can use English in their real-life situations by acquiring necessary language skills as well as knowledge, learning about cultures and values, developing positive attitudes, pursuing higher education and having better access to local and global employment. (National Curriculum, 2012, p. 2)

Pedagogically, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was deployed to develop English language skills required in the job market as part of human capital (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Moreover, the Government implemented a secondary education project called Secondary Education Sector Development Project (2007-2013) jointly funded by Asian Development Bank and the Ministry of Education to achieve the curriculum reform for human capital development:

The curriculum reform that began in the 1990s aimed to align student learning with the skills needed in the emerging open market economy by improving the quality and relevance of the curriculum. This approach to curriculum reform, underpinned by neoliberal economic principles and informed by human capital theory sought to increase secondary school graduates' potential future earnings. (Asian Development Bank, 2015, p.12)

Promises of English have also been articulated by transnational actors as development partners. English language reforms over the years have been facilitated by ELT aid projects funded by international and bilateral agencies. A significant milestone in ELT development aid was a 10-year project called English in Action (2009-2018) which was funded by UKaid through its Department for International Development, recently renamed Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). The project was initiated as an endorsement of the role of English in human capital development to locate Bangladesh in the global map of economic competitiveness. This focused ELT intervention sought to address systemic deficiency in ELT, develop human capital and take people out of poverty (Eyres, McCormick & Power, 2019). This was unambiguously stated in the official goal of the project:

English in Action aims at enabling 25 million Bangladeshi adults and school children to improve their English language skills that will help them access better economic and social opportunities. (EIA, 2017, cited in Erling, 2017, p. 392)

English in Action was more than just another project in the long line of ELT projects in Bangladesh, as it targeted poor and disadvantaged groups. The assumption was that although English was universally available in the education system, it is the marginalised groups who have been left out and therefore who were in need of English more than other groups. As another key goal of EIA stated:

English in Action is about equipping the poorest people with language skills that will help them find jobs, engage in entrepreneurial activities and improve their standard of living. (cited in Erling, 2017, p. 393)

This goal is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals which followed the Millennium Development Goals, the UN framework of globally articulated and agreed upon promises given to the poor and disadvantaged groups (Eyres, McCormick & Power, 2019). As the project noted:

With English rapidly becoming the global language of business, fluency in working English can play a major role in helping people escape from poverty. Nearly 70 million Bangladeshis survive on less than a dollar a day and a third of the urban population lives in slums. The programme, English in Action, supports the internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals, which are aimed at eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. (English in Action, n.d.).

As a signatory to MDGs and SDGs, Bangladesh has shouldered the goals of quality, inclusive and equitable education for all. As English is widely represented as a way out of poverty and disadvantage and entry into employment and economic productivity, the social and ethical questions of inclusiveness and equality become more pertinent to English language teaching and learning than any other school subjects. It is on these grounds that we are interested in exploring how rural students in Bangladesh relate to the

promises of English. We integrated the three doctoral studies conducted in the same region as an innovative way of presenting this relation.

The ‘Darker’ Side of the Promises of English

While, as educators, we do not underestimate the instrumental value of English given its dominance in many aspects of life globally, we cannot hide our informed scepticism about the promises of English outlined in the previous section (see May, 2016; Ricento, 2012; 2018; Sayer, 2018). To what extent English proficiency is causal in producing different economic outcomes is an empirical question (Erling & Seargeant, 2013). Although studies conducted in different social settings have generally suggested associations between English proficiency and employability and earning differences (see Doan & Hamid, 2021 for a review), empirically it is difficult to separate the singular contribution of English, as the economic outcomes are the result of many factors such as educational qualifications, English, and other language proficiency working together. Secondly, a critical question is whether the English language can produce comparable economic outcomes for people from different social contexts, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite the emergence of English as a popular language freed from its elitist nexus, it is still very likely that successful learning of English will be associated more with some social groups than others (Butler et al, 2018; Hamid, 2016a; Lie et al., 2022).

Importantly, the promises of English that abound the academic and popular literature tend to be silent about the requirements for learning English (Hamid, 2011). Assuming English works as a linguistic and symbolic capital in different linguistic markets, who has access to the linguistic capital in the first place and what social and economic affordances are implied by this access are questions that need to be asked. At the same time, English as a linguistic capital cannot be considered a singular brand. The English linguistic capital is expected to be of different types and categories, some with more capital power than others. For example, Standard Singapore English and Singlish may not be sold in the same linguistic market at the same price. The same question can be asked in the context of Bangladesh to understand which group of students are likely to develop an educated variety of English demanded by the job market and who are likely to have only basilectal varieties. Finally, the discourses of the social and economic promises of English underestimate time and other factors in the process of the transformation of language into marketable linguistic capital. One difference between linguistic and other kinds of capital is that the former is embodied which does not exist outside the human. Learners have to internalise the language input provided by self- or other-instruction to develop the functional ability needed in different contexts of communication. Studies have shown that even after years of instruction students across societies fail to develop workable functional competence in the language (Kaplan et al, 2011). Arguing that all students from modest social circumstances can change their economic destiny by means of English may be seen as giving false hope, if not misguidance.

This discussion takes us to the question of how poverty relates to English learning and developing linguistic capital in English (see the special issue articles in Butler et al., 2018). Such questions have not been important part of the research agenda in applied linguistics and ELT arguably because they are not aligned with the goals and interests of the global ELT industry. Opportunities for learning English are ubiquitous, meaning that one can learn English (or other languages) anytime anywhere. Practically, however, these learning opportunities are open to those who have the means. Moreover, researchers have shown that despite their universal availability, ELT courses and materials are targeted at particular social class and specific lifestyles, culture, and habitus (Song, 2018). ELT textbooks thrive on consumerism, and this is what they also look for in their target customers (Gray, 2010).

The relationship between poverty and English learning can be examined from the perspectives of social class/socioeconomic status (Butler et al, 2018). However, class has remained somewhat of a taboo subject and only recently it has been highlighted in applied linguistics (Block, 2014). Class needs to be associated

with English learning outcomes across societies to develop better understanding of the role of English in social mobility (Murphy, 2018).

Hamid (2009) put forward the framework of what he calls the “sociology of language learning” to examine the contingent nature of language learning on social, cultural and material foundations. The framework calls for examining students’ “social biographies” comprising different forms of capital that students have access to at home, school and community and habitus that they develop in their social worlds. Students’ English learning experiences and outcomes at school and community need to be examined in the light of their social biographies. Application of this sociology of education framework to English learning in rural communities may illuminate social, psychological, and sociological dimensions of language learning. This holistic approach is a way of investigating poverty and schooling in relation to applied linguistics and English learning and social class. Such an approach also illuminates language learning under difficult circumstances which have been put forward by scholars in African and Asian contexts (Kuchah & Shamim, 2018; Lestari, 2020; Passasung, 2003). This article draws on this sociology of language learning to examine the life and language learning experience of primary and secondary school students in a disadvantaged region in Bangladesh. Our aim is to develop a multifaceted understanding of how rural English learners relate to the promises of English in light of their social biographies and their social worlds. We draw on insights from three doctoral studies conducted in this region for our aims.

English Learning Struggles in Rural Bangladesh

While the outcomes of English teaching in Bangladesh have been modest in general, such outcomes are even more negligible for rural students (Hamid, 2009). Students from rural poor families are particularly disadvantaged because they do not have an educational safety net. English language instruction at school often does not contribute much to learning due to institutional, pedagogical, and teacher-related factors. While students from more well-off families may ignore school instruction in favour of fee-paying private tutoring (Hamid, Sussex & Khan, 2009), poorer students are reliant on schooling only for learning and academic socialisation. Their home environment may not support learning and academic pursuit. However, if school fails to provide this nurturing environment, which is often the case for many rural schools, poor students have no other place to go. They may experience different kinds of struggles related to life, society, home, school, English and education. Instead of providing hope, the promises of English may only add to their inner struggles.

In this section we represent these struggling lives and situations of rural students in order to provide an understanding of how they may relate to the discourses of English as a language of mobility and hope. We draw on our doctoral studies which were conducted in the northern region of Bangladesh. The rural context of the three studies is noteworthy because this region has the highest rate of rural poverty, lowest rate of literacy and highest rate of unemployment. The main source of employment and income in the region is agriculture. Many people look forward to agricultural work for their livelihood which is available only seasonally. The unemployment rate skyrockets at other times of the year often leading to a seasonal famine affecting the most disadvantaged families and communities, although the situations have improved somewhat in recent years, thanks to the economic progress achieved nationally.

Collectively, the three doctoral studies provide a comprehensive view of what happens to English and English learning in rural communities in Bangladesh which helps to critically examine the promises of English and ascertain the likelihood of local students’ escape from rural poverty and disadvantage. While each of the studies makes an original contribution to knowledge with its own focus, it is the commonality of insights across the studies that motivated us to bring them together in one article. The integration of the studies is innovative as it enables a comprehensive portrayal of the reality of English learning by rural students and provides a triangulated perspective on how these students relate to the global and local promises of English previously discussed. The studies were undertaken at three time periods in the past 12 years enabling a longitudinal perspective on the issues discussed. Two of the studies were hosted by

universities in Malaysia and one in Australia. The researchers are/were members of the communities that they have researched. Working as English language educators in Bangladesh and/or Australia and/or UK, they were motivated to understand the life chances of local students, and how English language may relate to their future. The three studies are complementary in that each focuses on one of the three levels of pre-tertiary education in which English is a compulsory subject: primary, secondary, and higher secondary. Another example of complementarity is related to the research focus: While all three studies bring together the issues of home, school and society in understanding English teaching and learning in the region from a holistic perspective, Study 1 (Hamid, 2009) has more emphasis on social and familial factors, Study 2 (Islam, 2019) on non-curricular provision of English (private tutoring), and Study 3 (Hoque, 2020) on pedagogy. Each of the studies is introduced below in brief to provide an understanding of how English and its promises may work in the social biographies of students in their community.

Study 1: Social Biographies and English Learning in the Rural North

A mixed-method case study informed by Bourdieu's sociology of education theory, this research sought to understand the life and English learning experience of Year 10 students in seven rural secondary schools in one sub-district in the region. A total of 228 students from these schools were given a survey which tried to understand their family socioeconomic and cultural situation in terms of different forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural) and habitus. These students were also given an English language test to develop an understanding of their English learning outcomes. Correlations between the measures of family capital and habitus and English language proficiency were investigated which suggested that even in such a context where the sample was overly represented by students from low-SES families, there were patterned associations between social and material possessions and English language achievement scores as measured by the test.

A sub-sample of 14 students were followed up for detailed interviews in their homes including interviews with their parents. This qualitative phase of the study was illuminating as it brought out the struggles of the students at home, school, and community. Table 1 shows the students' family capital divided into the categories of high, above average, below average, and low, and different measures of English proficiency achievement together with their GPA in the Year 10 school-leaving examination called Secondary School Certificate (SSC). Except for the case of Rajib, the other cases show a patterned relationship between family capital and academic outcomes. The cases demonstrate that students from below average and low family capital are unlikely to do well at school and school-leaving examination. They are even more unlikely to do well in English. For example, even when we consider the exceptional case of Rajib, who obtained GPA 5, the second highest GPA, he ended up with a B in the SSC examination. There were no notable differences in his English scores across different contexts. For example, he scored C on the proficiency test administered as part of the research while his own expectation of the SSC examination was A-.

Regardless of the grades, English language test scores are not reliable indicators of the ability to use language in different situations in academic, social and workplace domains (Ali, Hamid & Hardy, 2020). As part of the interviews, the Year 10 students were given an option to speak in English. It must have been an unthinkable suggestion to them, including the students from high family capital family who also obtained relatively higher grades in English. None of them volunteered to speak in English. They were also invited to introduce themselves in English during the interview, and only a handful of them were able to do so beyond a couple of disjointed sentences.

If such were the English-learning outcomes for these cohort of rural students after 10 years of learning English, it is not impossible to predict their future in terms of English learning. For many of these students, Year 10 was the destination of their academic journey after which they would explore the world of work. While some students did not qualify to sit the SSC examination, some others may succeed to sit the exam only to fail in the end. Most failures in school-leaving public examinations are concentrated in rural Bangladesh and they occur in the two subjects of English and mathematics (Hamid, 2016a). A small fraction of students may be able to continue their education journey through Years 11-12 and university/college,

but they are unlikely to develop high level of proficiency in English. If the first 10 years of learning English did not give them a basic foundation in functional English, a few more years cannot be expected to do a miracle for them.

The study was conducted over a decade ago, but English language education has not changed much in the intervening years in the region. The contribution of English to the transformation of students as human capital is minimal. Arguing that these students will be able to capitalise English and English linguistic capital for work and employment does not have a strong basis. Fortunately, the rural students who succeed in landing jobs in the public sector after completing university or college education do so not because of the linguistic capital of English but because of the limited role of English in the recruitment process. If English were to play a more decisive role, rural students would disqualify in higher proportions in competing with job applicants from urban settings.

TABLE 1
Students' Family Capital Profiles and Indicators of Their Academic Achievement

Students (pseudo.)	Gender and school	Family capital	English grades (school test)	English test scores (out of 60)/grades	Eng. grades expected in SSC	Eng. grades obtained in SSC	SSC GPA
Moumi	F/TGH	High	A+	52 (A+)	A+	A	5.00
Tuhin	M/THS	High	A	48 (A+)	A+	A-	4.75
Kazal	M/SHS	Above average	C	17 (F)	A	C	3.88
Samira	F/BGH	Above average	A+	37 (A-)	A+	A-	4.50
Silan	M/SHS	Above average	A-	40 (A-)	A+	A-	4.81
Afrin	F/FHS	Below average	D	28 (C)	B	Absent	NA~
Neeman	M/THS	Below average	D	14 (F)	A	F	F
Shathi	F/SHS	Below average	F	17 (F)	B	F	F
Tania	F/FHS	Below average	C	25 (C)	A+	C	3.31
Konka	F/FHS	Low	F	13 (F)	None	Absent	NA
Mitun	F/TGH	Low	C	14 (F)	A+	C	F
Monir	M/BTH	Low	C	19 (F)	A	D	3.50
Rajib	M/FHS	Low	A-	27 (C)	A-	B	5.00
Sophia	F/BGH	Low	B	14 (F)	B	Absent	NA

Study 2: Phenomenology of Private Tutoring in English

Informed by Dornyei's (2009) second language motivational self-system and Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory, this phenomenological research examined the lived experiences of Year 12 students who received private tutoring in English (PT-E). Although phenomenology has multiple streams, the major stream associated with Edmund Husserl seeks to describe experience and understand its meaning (Larsen & Adu, 2021). Accordingly, this study examined students' experience of PT-E as an out of school educational provision (a form of cultural capital) which potentially enhanced learning but also contributed to inequality between students who had access to this cultural capital and those who did not. The research selected 11 students to capture their lived experiences of PT-E who were located in two socio-economically and socio-educationally different contexts in the northern region of Bangladesh. The first context was a regional city where more privileged students had relatively easy access to more qualified PT-E tutors and were able to pay high tuition fees. The second was a rural sub-district not far from the context of Study 1

and this site aimed to capture PT-E experiences of those students who were from modest social backgrounds and were able to make only modest investment in PT-E.

Private tutoring has emerged as a dominant site for teaching and learning in Bangladesh, as in many other Asian societies. Specifically for English, as school instruction has proved to be less effective, students from all social backgrounds resort to PT-E with the hope of securing higher grades and GPAs in school-leaving exams which determine their access to colleges and universities (Ali, Hamid & Hardy, 2020). While school instruction has a common goal for all students, PT-E is customised and need-based (Hamid, Khan & Islam, 2018). Its quality, frequency and intensity depend on the capital power of parents and students as PT-E customers. Poor and struggling students may seek PT-E just to cross the line of failure, while well-off and high-performing students may purchase PT-E lessons for higher grades and GPAs. Thus, PT-E has emerged as the new site for social, economic, and educational struggles demanding investigation for an understanding of the promises of English for rural students in Bangladesh.

The data analysis based on the phenomenological approach led to identifying 13 themes/meanings from the 11 verbatim transcripts of interviews, researcher field-notes and PT-E artefacts including: PT-E as an alternative to school instruction, public examination pressure, PT-E and academic achievement, dissatisfaction with school English teaching, PT-E response to academic credentials, role of English in Bangladesh, peer pressure and PT-E participation, parental involvement, financial disparity and PT-E, and social construction of PT-E. Irrespective of students' location (rural and urban), school affiliation (government or non-government school) and form of tutoring (one to one or group), PT-E has come to substitute school English teaching because nothing much happens in the formal space in terms of teaching and learning. The students considered PT-E "an immediate necessity" to take away the public examination pressure. Depending on affordability, they participated in PT-E as school teaching was "not enough" to achieve the best examination results. Furthermore, the students considered PT-E as the only available remedy for unhelpful school teaching which was "impossible to be happy with". Regardless of their location, the students were aware of the social value of academic credentials, and they believed that PT-E was "very important" to earn their desired academic results. Students' PT-E involvement was also recognition of the crucial role that English has come to play in Bangladesh and globally, although their immediate concern was the examination (Islam & Hoque, 2019).

The study is an example of learner-centred research which focuses on how participants experience their learning context, classroom teaching and their learning experiences from their perspectives (Hamid & Baldauf, 2011). The findings have significant educational and social consequences for English language education in the country. Modest English learning outcomes as reported by public examination results (Hamid, 2016a) indicate that English teaching over the years has consumed significant economic capital nationally also occupying a large portion of the curriculum space, but it has not produced expected results. If English is an essential component of human capital, the policy goal of developing human capital can be appreciated. Socially, poor teaching of English in the formal space and the emergence of PT-E as an alternative learning space undermine the principles of social justice because not all students have equal access to PT-E. If English is important to develop cultural capital, rural poor students would be denied access to cultural capital paybacks because of their low level of English attainment. They may resort to PT-E as a social remedy only to discover that if it were going to work, it would not work equally for all.

Study 3: Tyranny of ELT Pedagogy in Rural Primary Education

The replacement of the traditional Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) defined the new English language education policy in Bangladesh in the 1990s (Hoque et al., 2021). This curricular and pedagogical reform aimed to produce a generation of students competent in English language skills to meet higher education and job-market demands in the 21st century. Study 3 provides a critical examination of the promises of English for rural students from a pedagogical perspective.

The study was conducted in eight mainly river-eroded and socio-economically impoverished sub-districts in northern Bangladesh. These locations of the research are mostly disconnected from the

advantages and facilities that the infrastructural and other developments have accomplished in the last four and a half decades in the country. Poverty in general and malnourishment of children and lack of motivation for education of all involved in particular are a sorry saga of this backward part of the country.

The research deployed a mixed-method approach within a quasi-experimental design. The research instruments used were an initial situational analysis of ELT conducted through questionnaire administration with 416 CLT teachers followed by eight workshops with CLT-trained and untrained teachers, semi-structured interviews, lesson observation and a Focus Group Discussion. A day-long workshop with 112 participants was conducted to facilitate understanding of CLT and strategies for its implementation in these disadvantaged schools.

The findings from the quantitative data showed teachers' lack of understanding of the basic CLT principles, limited teacher competence of English based on self-report, inadequate opportunities for teachers' continuing professional development (CPD), uncertain use of technological devices and ineffective guidance and supervision mechanisms. The findings from the qualitative data included lack of teacher training, teachers' poor language skills and motivation, teachers' challenges in handling English textbooks, which did not reflect the life and reality of rural students and their social surroundings.

Studies including Islam (2011) and Karim, Mohamed and Rahman (2017) reported that CLT programmes have been ineffective and unsuccessful in many countries including Bangladesh. The present study provided endorsement of these findings. Many of the issues emerging from the research were also pointed out at the beginning of the ELT flagship project called English in Action (EIA) Bangladesh (2009-2018) which aimed for a significant improvement of English teaching and learning and English proficiency attainment. The Baseline Study 4 (2009) undertaken by EIA researchers reiterated:

The problem has a cyclical element in that those lecturers and tutors who train and supervise graduates and primary school teachers for pre-service or professional status are themselves poor in spoken English and therefore at the start of the cycle of teaching and learning there is already a teaching/learning deficiency and this is perpetuated by the rote learning of textbook materials for examinations that are focused on recall and not on understanding or use. If the teacher trainers of English teachers are themselves having difficulty with pronunciation, interactive spoken English and use of English for communicative purposes; then, the cyclical problems are exacerbated. (English in Action, 2009, p. 3)

Despite the landmark EIA intervention and other efforts and investments by education authorities, CLT implementation in Bangladesh, especially in the rural regions, has remained a euphoria in imagination of policymakers and funding agencies (Hamid & Jahan, 2021a). Therefore, the promises of CLT and of English have turned out to be 'fake assurances' at best.

Discussion and Conclusion

Non-Anglophone education systems the world over have introduced English in their curriculum in various forms to develop citizens' English language proficiency to turn them into human capital. English has emerged as a key component of the linguistic pathway for nations to assert their global competitiveness in knowledge and economy. However, while the economic returns to English for individuals and societies cannot be denied, popular and academic discourses of English have tended to construct the language as a panacea for poverty and underdevelopment (Coleman, 2011). Such discourses have tended to ignore that language proficiency usually contributes to instrumental outcomes together with other forms of economic, social, and cultural capital. In other words, the economic returns that are highlighted are not the singular effect of English proficiency. In fact, there are methodological challenges in determining effects of English proficiency for individuals or nations (Erling & Seargeant, 2013). Secondly, while national education policies are expected to motivate students to commit to English and English learning, such policies may

show naiveté in the assertion that school instruction in English can automatically turn linguistic achievement into marketable linguistic or human capital. Such naiveté needs to be underscored in those education systems in particular which have not created optimal academic environment for the teaching and learning of English in the classroom. Finally, given the modest outcomes of school English instruction on the one hand and significant opportunities for learning English beyond the classroom through private investment on the other, not all social groups may stand equal chance of learning English, developing human capital, and reaping the economies benefits of English (see Song, 2018).

Critical scholars have emphasized the contingent nature of English and its economic returns. For example, Holborow (1999, p. 2) has argued that “English is either the modernizing panacea or the ruthless oppressor, depending on your place in the world”. Similarly, Ricento refuses to give whole credit to the language itself, when he observes:

Certainly, English has value for many of these mobile individuals; however, I have tried to demonstrate that English is not the inherent hegemon, nor the de facto oppressor, nor the ticket to social or economic mobility, nor the crucial factor in promoting a global demos that it is claimed to be, to varying degrees... (Ricento, 2012, p.49)

Along the same line, Hamid (2016b) has argued:

[...] the “English-mobility” discourse [...] overlooks the catalyst role played by the material condition of those who seek English and English proficiency. This discursive politics of overvaluing of English can be called “hyper-linguaging”, which denies not only the materiality of language itself, but also the catalyst role of economic capital in accessing other material and non-material resources including English. (pp. 268-269)

Informed by such critical scholarship and drawing on the sociology of language learning, this article has illustrated how the promises of English may play out for poor students in rural Bangladesh who are locked in various forms of socioeconomic disadvantage and marginality in their own context. The three doctoral studies have had somewhat different focuses and emphases but bringing them together has shown that they were complementary in providing a holistic picture of English learning and teaching in the rural region taking into account familial, social, institutional, pedagogical and socioeconomic dimensions (Butler et al, 2018). All three studies portray the harsh reality of English learning by rural poor students and the integration of the findings shows powerfully how the promises of English are unlikely to materialize in their life. The article suggests that any singular perspective/lens related to policy or pedagogy may be inadequate in understanding English teaching and learning, as both the language and language pedagogy have come to occupy significant spaces outside the classroom in family and social networks, private tutoring market, study abroad and language tourism and the virtual world (Song, 2018).

English may play an emancipatory role for certain groups and communities (Vaish, 2008), but we do not see a clear pathway for the students reported in our studies to actualise the promised benefits of English. Therefore, the promises of English touted by local and global policy actors are likely to be interpreted as “fake” promises while the principles of equality and inclusiveness underpinning the policy of “English for all” may appear false inclusivity at best. As we have argued, things are likely to get worse in the post-pandemic world which may have new demand for English accompanied by a new form of disadvantage for rural students.

In such a context where promises are likely to be experienced as fake, we are sensitive to drawing any big conclusions that may also appear to be false research/academic promises. Educational research can be part of social activism and advocacy but that is not necessarily an intervention for addressing educational, social, and economic issues. Many actions are needed in multiple fronts to address the complex challenges facing rural students in learning English and pursuing education in their local context.

While English learning has produced modest outcomes for most Asian education systems (Hamid & Ali, 2022), Bangladeshi education policymakers may learn from relatively better performing systems such as India, Vietnam, and South Korea. Ensuring rural schools have sufficient numbers of well-qualified English teachers throughout the year may be a small achievable policy goal. Policymakers may utilise ELT aid for improving teaching and learning in rural schools as a priority. Schools also need to ensure that instruction in English (in other subjects as well) is available for students at all grade levels. It is appreciable that English teaching in Bangladesh has relied on English textbooks locally authored by Bangladeshi writers (Hamid & Jahan, 2021b). However, such textbooks need to reflect life and reality of rural communities using a variety of English that shows local authenticity. Educators, policymakers, and media professionals need to promote more realistic, responsible, and ethical views of English and its role in society highlighting how English proficiency works with other language skills, education qualifications, technological literacy and attitudes and dispositions in various sectors. English teachers need to have a critical pedagogical orientation so that they are able to deconstruct the promises of English with their students while maximising their English learning potential (Al Mahmud, 2020). Instead of denying the role and value of English, such critical approaches may help learners develop critical awareness while also supporting them to take English learning seriously despite all odds. Finally, education policymakers need to prioritise English teaching and learning and educational improvement in rural Bangladesh in order to reduce the urban-rural gap in education which has its impact on other areas.

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