“Whose language is it anyway?” English Language and Access: The Case of Bangladeshis in London
(Discussion Paper)

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Background

Over the last 12 months Government policy has shifted away from multiculturalism and towards a more traditionalist position of integration or assimilation, manifested in pronouncements on such matters as citizenship tests and (more recently) the costs of translation and interpretation. The debate about language has been presented in the simplistic terms of aggregate expenditures (estimated in the public sector at £100 million) and as an option between incurring current levels of spending on interpretation and translation or reducing these and shifting resources into English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The debate in the BMJ illustrates this polarity. However, the linkage between allocation of benefits and the need to speak English has raised the issue of the provision of and access to ESOL training. The Interim and Final Reports of the Commission for Integration and Cohesion have articulated the tensions between these different demands on funding and the Department of Communities and Local Government have conducted a review into language matters. Lack of English is a critical barrier to integration, communication, and social cohesion for new migrants and settled communities, frequently creating social distance. It hampers people’s efforts to integrate economically, access the labour market, and develop a sense of belonging with others. It is clearly not the only barrier, others including racism and social class, but it is amenable to change. The most commonly identified barrier to “being English” in the Commission’s polling was not speaking English. The acquisition of English language skills is, then, a major key to the advancement of social well-being. Beyond the expenditure debate, the Government is mindful of the need to review the delivery mechanisms for ESOL teaching at a local level, including the building up of skills, consideration of the timing and length of courses, the provision of classes in the workplace, length of waiting lists, and improvements in the quality and focus of the training on offer.

The Bangladeshi community faces precisely issues of socio-economic isolation, as they have the lowest levels of ability in the use of English of all 2001-Census defined ethnic categories, both overall and at different levels of “own group” density. Moreover, the group is strongly concentrated in Tower Hamlets and six other Inner London Boroughs north of the Thames and may be expected to be less integrated than other communities with a more dispersed pattern of settlement. Further, all the indicators of disadvantage and deprivation show the Bangladeshi community to be the worst off. Acquisition of English language skills within the household would have a major impact on educational attainment levels, current penalties experienced in the labour market, and the ability of community members to access public services, once other structural disadvantage confounders are adjusted for.

The literature on English language use by Bangladeshis in London is sparse, focusing upon second generation and frequently young people. There is very little research that has examined English language use and competency with the first generation (migrants). One of the few studies on English language use amongst adult members - Bangladeshi women in Birmingham - found that these women felt unable to support their children in their education due to their poor knowledge of

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1 Philip Messant (1992) noted that 95% of Bangladeshis came to London from the poor rural Sylhet district of Bangladesh and first began to settle in Britain in the mid-1950s, their families arriving from the late 1960s.

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English. They felt disempowered, embarrassed and uncomfortable about using translators, and unable to learn English for themselves, while recognising the benefits.

There is some indicative evidence that the age and gender of the translators is crucial and one of the main reasons for not asking for English language assistance: one NHS study, for example, found that “many interpreters are young and women [which] was perceived to cause concern for older male patients”. Other difficulties that have been identified include the time required for training and difficulties of accurately conveying meaning. The needs of the Bangladeshi community have not been adequately addressed in terms of access to culturally competent ESOL training, that is, training that encompasses the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes.

This brief paper discusses the findings of a project funded by the Nuffield Small Social Science Grants Scheme. One-to-one interviews were undertaken between August 2008 and April 2009 of both first generation Bangladeshi males and females across two age ranges from 25 to 44 and 45 to 65/70. In total 17 interviews have been undertaken so far (in sum 30 will be conducted with Bangladeshi men and women). Interviews will also be held with ESOL teachers. This paper reports upon the interviews held only with the Bangladeshi participants. The interviews have been based in four East London Boroughs selected on the basis of ethnic density of Bangladeshis –

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bangladeshi ethnic group</th>
<th>Fluency in English in FNS (%)</th>
<th>Own group density by ward, 2001 Census</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Own group density by ward</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2%</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>18 wards in Waltham Forest</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 &lt;5%</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18 wards in Hackney</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 &lt;10%</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>8 wards in Newham</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 &lt;15%</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3 wards in Newham</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 &lt;25%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4 wards in Newham</td>
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<tr>
<td>25 &lt;33%</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3 wards in Tower Hamlets</td>
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<tr>
<td>33% &amp; over</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>9 wards in Tower Hamlets</td>
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Discussion

This paper looks at the findings of an exploratory project mapping out the social structures and environments where first generation Bangladeshis use English and considers what their motivations are for learning English. The key issue is whether their motivations differed in relation to gender and age. The discussion will look into Bangladeshi men and women’s overall attitudes and perceptions towards language – especially the emphasis they placed on learning English and/or retaining Bengali/Sylheti for themselves and their offspring. Moreover, this discussion is especially relevant in the light of new government policies on social cohesion, as first generation minorities are increasingly under pressure to acquire English in order to show an allegiance to the UK. The newly introduced citizenship test has made proficiency in English a pre-requisite for minorities not only to learn English, but also to demonstrate a cultural understanding of Britain by having to pass a ‘citizenship test’ in order to become UK citizens.

Attitudes to Learning English

The evidence from this study suggests that the Bangladeshi respondents acknowledged the importance of learning English for a multitude of reasons. A strong and overriding factor for men was learning English for work and communication, while Bangladeshi women felt learning English was important for both work and family life. Widespread media coverage and public opinion has however led to the suggestion that minority groups in Britain actively resist learning English in order to avoid cultural and linguistic assimilation. According to this view, minorities resist learning English and wish to preserve their own culture and language for fear of being seen as ‘Anglicised’; in the case of Muslim minorities the association of Anglicisation alludes to the notion of being ‘un-Islamic’. However, there was little evidence to draw such a supposition in this research.

Work and employment was noted by Bangladeshi men as a strong motivation for learning English; one male Bangladeshi respondent was aware of achieving a proficient level of English in order to work, but at the same time, was conscious of retaining the attachment to Bengali, he noted “Bengali is important for our own culture, but English is also very important. In this country, we need to learn English for jobs, work and communication” (Male aged group 23-44, Limehouse, Mile End & Globe Town Ward). According to this respondent, the practicalities associated with learning English were different than the sentiments attached to retaining Bengali as a mother tongue. Thus, it seems that for Bangladeshi men, learning English is prized primarily for its utility in accessing work, however, Bengali is accorded with a separate status that provides a sense of self-identity.

For Bangladeshi women, an overarching motivation for learning English was to support their families and children. Other women suggested that learning English would help in attaining employment in childcare, however, these motivations took far less precedence than learning English in order to support their families. The Bangladeshi women valued learning English and took great pride in being able to communicate without depending upon their husbands and children. One Bangladeshi woman noted that, “I like to learn English. I have a plan that by learning English I will be able to get a job. I don’t want to be dependent on my husband for long. I also don’t want to take help from the interpreter anymore...Secondly, it is essential to speak English when I go to the GP or the hospital. When I go outside, I feel English is very important” (Female aged group 23-44, Limehouse). According to this respondent, she wanted to be more independent and speak for herself, rather than being represented by others. The importance of English for Bangladeshi women was less concerned about gaining employment, but about being able to communicate on their own without assistance. They seemed to be suggesting that being able to communicate on their own increased their sense of self-esteem and confidence. For women with children, their reasons for learning English centred around
being able to support their children to do well at school, “...Only my younger boy does not speak Bengali. He is a delayed speaker. He has encountered problems in speaking English. Now he mainly speaks English with his brother and sister. But I understand his English as he speaks very simple English. Some time I speak with him English” (Female aged group 23-44, Limehouse). This respondent spoke about how she wanted to improve her level of English in order to support her child’s language development and support her older children in further and higher education. Thus, the women’s motivations for learning English differed from the men’s, as the women were more concerned with taking a supportive/secondary role in their families by helping their children rather using English directly in a work environment.

Summary

The research findings have shown so far that first generation Bangladeshis accept the need to learn English – however, their motivations differed according to gender. Whereas Bangladeshi men suggested that learning English was important primarily for work, Bangladeshi women felt that improving their English would help them play a more supportive role with their families and children.

Further findings from this study will focus upon the research conducted with ESOL teachers and will consider whether ESOL provision addresses the social and cultural settings of Bangladeshi students. A discussion on the impact of the citizenship test in terms of ESOL training will also be undertaken in order to understand the changing motivations of the students in learning English.

References