

## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN DEVELOPMENT

N.BUJJI BABU<sup>1</sup>, L.CYRIL ARUN KUMAR<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Chemistry, VSR & NVR College, Tenali-522201, Guntur Dt, A.P, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of Zoology, VSR & NVR College, Tenali-522201, Guntur Dt, A.P, India

### Abstract

This paper attempts to identify the roles which the English language has been given (successfully or otherwise) in development. It begins with a brief discussion of how understanding of the concept of 'development' has changed over the last six decades and concurs with Amartya Sen's view that *'Development can be seen ... as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.'* The paper then examines four different roles that have been given to English: for employability, in international mobility, as a key for unlocking development opportunities and as a neutral language. The paper concludes that whilst there is evidence that English is important in these four roles, some caution is needed as well: English can be dangerously overused, it is not the only international language and there is a tendency to exaggerate its role. More research is needed before we can understand both the real value of English in development and the risks of using it inappropriately.

### 1) What do we understand by 'development'?

It believes that, English is critical for countries successful participation in the global economy, that it provides individuals with access to crucial knowledge, skills and employment opportunities and enables organisations to create and sustain international links. It is well recognised that there is a positive relationship between education and development: for example, if women are literate, they tend to have fewer children, are healthier and are better able to look after and educate the children they do have. But where exactly should we look for evidence of a relationship between English and development?

First, we need to agree on what we mean by 'development' itself. Over the last sixty years paradigms of development have undergone rapid change, from simplistic Cold War era expectations that the 'Third World' could and should be persuaded to follow a 'First World' economic model in preference to communism, through a growing awareness of the interdependence of 'North' and 'South', to the present concern with the relationship between good governance and poverty reduction.

Current thinking is that development must accommodate both economic and social elements: Economic growth is a necessary, but not sufficient,

condition for development. Without redistribution of income and wealth, inequalities are not going to be reduced, and there is much evidence that it is inequalities that hurt. Thus, development must be regarded as synonymous with enhancing human rights and welfare, so that self-esteem, self-respect and improving entitlements become central concerns.

The Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen shares this perspective, arguing that development must focus on the 'entitlements' which society grants to its members and the 'capabilities' which derive from these entitlements. *Development can be seen ... as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.* Growth of GNP or of individual incomes can, of course, be very important as means to expanding the freedoms enjoyed by the members of the society. But freedoms depend also on other determinants, such as social and economic arrangements (for example, facilities for education and health care) as well as political and civil rights (for example, the liberty to participate in public discussion and scrutiny).

### 2) English for employability

Early attempts to explore the relationship between English and employability struggled to address questions such as:

- ❖ What are the economic benefits of English language teaching, in so far as we can separate them from the benefits of education in general?
- ❖ What is the economic cost to a country of deciding to adopt English as a medium of instruction when English is not the mother tongue?
- ❖ Is there an economic cost in deciding not to use English as the medium of instruction in favour of retaining the indigenous language?

Early economically driven attempts to identify the impact of English on development – and, specifically, on employability – were largely unsuccessful. In recent years, however, research has managed to show that in specific circumstances English does indeed have an impact on individuals, in particular industrial sectors and at the national level. It should be noted, though, that some of the studies reported here have been carried out only in advanced economies; further investigation is needed to establish whether similar patterns can be seen in poorer economies as well.

One major implication of these studies is that a broad-brush approach to the English development relationship is probably not very useful. Instead, a more fine grained approach is required, looking at particular types of economy and particular sectors of activity. For example, it has been suggested that service economies are most likely to have a widespread need for English language skills, whilst in manufacturing economies it may be that only a relatively small number of personnel concerned with international trade will require English. Meanwhile, in rural economies the need to possess English language skills may be limited to a very small proportion of the population.

### **3) English, international mobility and development**

Any discussion of development or of English in the world must consider the phenomenon of globalisation and, in particular, that of international mobility. We will look at three aspects of international mobility here: international tourism and international student mobility.

#### **International tourism**

International tourism is already a huge international commercial undertaking. Despite occasional fluctuations in line with world economic trends, tourism is expected to continue to grow rapidly and by 2020 it is predicted that there will be 1.6 billion international tourist arrivals. The importance of English in international tourism is well recognised. There is a dynamic commercially driven response to the need in the form of English language training provided as part of tourism training programmes and in the publication of English language course books designed particularly for those engaged in the tourism industry. Tourism is particularly important to developing countries. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation recognises this importance through its ST-EP (Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty) Programme which provides assistance for the development of tourism in poor, rural and marginalised communities.

#### **International student mobility**

The movement of students from their country of origin to universities elsewhere is also a well recognised phenomenon. In 2008 there were almost three million international students worldwide, an increase from two million in just seven years. Approximately 45% of the world total of international students is studying in just four countries: USA, UK, Australia and Canada. These four destinations are said to be attractive not only because of the perceived quality of their higher education institutions but also because they use English. Many international students believe that by studying in one or other of these nations they will be able to achieve not only the qualification for which they have enrolled but also an improved degree of competence in English. A further 27% of international students are studying in France, Germany, China and Japan. It is likely that many if not the majority of these students are also studying through the medium of English.

The importance of English in international student mobility has been well recognised for many years, as manifested in the international English language competency tests - IELTS and TOEFL - which most receiving institutions and many visa issuing authorities require students to pass. But further

investigation is still required to measure the impact on developing countries both economically and in human development terms of their young people and early career professionals studying abroad. Are the capital outflows which are incurred recouped when graduates return to their country of origin? What percentage of students from developing countries never returns to their country of origin?

#### **4) English as a key for unlocking development opportunities and accessing crucial information**

The role that English plays in facilitating access to information and to development opportunities is well recognised but is worth restating here. A very different but crucially important aspect of accessing information concerns the interpretation of scientific findings and communicating them in a meaningful way to communities who are likely to be affected by these findings. The UK Enhancing Learning & Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELRHA) Project is currently sponsoring research to investigate how a local non-government organisation in Sumatra, Indonesia, interprets scientific research concerning the likelihood of major seismic events in the area and passes this information on to local communities in such a way that they can make informed decisions about appropriate action: A greater understanding of how agencies access, absorb and respond to scientific research pertaining to geophysical hazards could potentially lead to the implementation of mechanisms which have long term benefits towards the development of more robust mitigation and preparedness procedures. The scientific research referred to here is published in English whilst communication with local communities takes place in local languages.

#### **5) English as an impartial language**

In certain institutional and national contexts where inter-group rivalry is severe, to the extent that development is hindered, English has been given the task of acting as a 'link' or neutral language. In this way, it is hoped, inter-ethnic tensions and frustrations can be eased and the energies of the institution or country can be focussed on development. We have already noted the decision by a non-governmental organisation working on the borders of Burma to deliver community

development training through English. English has been proposed as an impartial language, starting with Afghanistan and then moving to Sri Lanka and Algeria.

In a small number of institutional and national contexts, English has had ambitious new developmental roles thrust upon it. In each case it is intended that, through the adoption of English for certain functions, communication between rival groups should become easier, thus helping to create a context which is more conducive to national development. In Afghanistan, Burma and Sri Lanka, it remains to be seen how successful these efforts will be, whilst in Algeria a very modest degree of success has been reported.

#### **Conclusions**

##### **English plays many roles in development**

We have seen that English plays many roles in development, by, for example,

- increasing individuals' employability
- enabling international collaboration and cooperation
- providing access to research and information
- facilitating the international mobility of students, tourists, workers and others
- facilitating disaster relief and disaster preparedness
- acting as an impartial language in contexts of disharmony.

##### **English is very powerful, but ...**

English, then, has many significant and influential roles to play. But we must avoid hubris, for a number of reasons.

- First, important as it is, English does not provide all the answers. In particular, special care must be paid when policies regarding the medium of instruction in primary education are being determined. Despite what appears to be widespread parental demand for the use of English in primary schools, there are very strong arguments for making sure that children achieve literacy in their mother tongue first. Furthermore, if English is to be used as a medium of instruction at a later stage in a child's education, then the child must be helped to move gradually towards that stage rather than being faced with a sudden shift from one language to another (for

example at the transition point between upper primary and lower secondary). Mother tongue literacy development may also have considerable empowering benefits for adults and may have an immediate impact on individuals' ability to participate in the informal economy.

- Secondly, we must not forget that English is not the only international language. There are several others which are also used for international communication (Arabic, Chinese/Mandarin, French, Fula (Fulani), Hausa, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swahili, for example), although English probably has a wider reach than any of these.

- Thirdly, there is some evidence that when English is selected as the medium for international communication (for example, within a multinational company) significant communication problems may be experienced.

- Fourthly, English is sometimes said to be the language of the internet. This may indeed have been the case in the early years of the internet, but it is now clear that other languages are increasingly widely used. A survey of more than 3200 internet home pages in 1997 found that 82% were in English, 4% in German, 2% in Japanese and another 2% in French. Chinese did not appear in the list of home page languages found. However, another study the following year showed that fewer than half of new websites were using English whilst a further survey found that by 2000 English was used in fewer than 10% of websites in Latin America. It has been predicted that, in the not too distant future, Chinese will be the most common website language.

- Fifthly, whilst there is a huge amount of goodwill towards English in many parts of the world, there is a risk that this goodwill may be squandered through the association with the 'war on terror' which the language is beginning to develop in the minds of some observers.

We don't yet know enough

- Despite the considerable sums of money spent on development projects (including English language projects) there are very few studies of their long term impact. In other words, we still have relatively little information about the influence which English language teaching has on individual and national

development. Even when the impact of development activities is investigated the role of language is often ignored or taken for granted.

- There is therefore an urgent need for more research. What is the reality behind the rhetoric of 'English for development'? What are the long-term benefits of learning and possessing English, for a nation, for communities and groups within the nation and for individuals within those communities? What are the side effects and what are the risks? This research should be carried out collaboratively by a team of specialists in language, education, development and economics (or at the very least a language education specialist is working with a development economist).

### **Finally**

Acquiring real competence in English is a privilege which in many contexts seems to bring with it many of the 'entitlements' and 'freedoms' which are attributes of development. However, 'access to English is far from equally distributed' and even well-intentioned efforts to promote English for development purposes may end up being restricted to privileged elite. Returning to Sen's formulation of development which we considered at the beginning of this paper, any 'entitlement' to English as a passport to development must be strictly available to all who desire it, otherwise it becomes a means of barring access to the less privileged. English undoubtedly plays a major role in various aspects of development. Nevertheless, it is important that we should not exaggerate the importance of English nor should we undervalue the importance of other languages. We must temper our enthusiasm for English with a sense of responsibility towards those who do not have easy access to it.

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