English and development: Voices from two rural Bangladeshi madrasas

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Abstract

Because of its global status, donors and states both promote English for the economic development of countries in the global South such as Bangladesh. National and western discourses propose that people in madrasas (Islamic educational institutes) should learn English for development and security. But voices from madrasas are little heard. Based on a linguistic ethnography, this paper presents some of these neglected perspectives on English for development, drawing on fieldwork in rural Bangladesh primarily at a private and unreformed Qawmi Madrasa but also at a reformed Aliya Madrasa. The findings show that people in the Qawmi Madrasa adopt a religious, reflexive and alternative stance, reject economic progress and western development programmes, and largely resist English as a language of development. People in the Aliya Madrasa, on the other hand, identify English with economic advancements such as mainstream higher education and employment, but their aspirations seem vulnerable to the (secular) stigmatisation of madrasas dominant in the society. Based on these findings and drawing in Southern theory, the paper interrogates the promotion of English for development, and asks how alert it is to heterogenous and complex southern realities.

1. Introduction

Language aid projects have a history of more than a century, and donors and states increasingly promote English as a language of development in the global South. However, *local* discourses of English and development have not received adequate attention in applied linguistics. This gap becomes further acute when it comes to sites like madrasas (Islamic educational institutes). They constitute a large size in the Muslim societies, and yet their perspectives have mostly been unheard in applied linguistics, even when there are national and global discourses that they should learn English for development and security (Bano, 2014; Karmani, 2005). Seeking to fill this gap, this paper, based on a linguistic ethnography, presents the voices of people in two rural Bangladeshi madrasas and interrogates the development interventionist promotion of English in the global South.

The global status of English has led to growing belief that English is a 'capital' that can help people in the global South to participate in the globalised economy with the consequence of better economic returns both for them and for their country (Erling and Seargeant, 2013; Coleman, 2010, 2011). Seargeant and Erling (2013, p. 3) say: 'if ever more countries globally are aiming to enhance English language education as a means of attracting foreign investment and participating in the global economy, developing economies cannot be excluded from this'. With claims like these being made, it is perhaps not surprising that the English language has become a significant component in international development projects, and that ELT projects in the global South strongly identify with the development potential of the English language (e.g. *English in Action* in Bangladesh, *Project English* in Sri Lanka) (Seargeant and Erling, 2011). 'English in Action', a £50 million eight year long project (2008-2017) in Bangladesh funded by the UK's Department for International Development, for example, aimed 'to significantly increase the number of people able to communicate in English to levels that will enable them to participate fully in economic and social activities and opportunities' (English in Action, 2017).

In contrast to views such as the above, considerable counter arguments, however, are available. Djité (2008) and Bamgbose (2014) argue that in African contexts, national emphasis on English or other ex-colonial languages like French for development, disregarding the linguistic agency of many local people in health, education or informal economy, has been counterproductive. Criticisms are also available that the donor-funded projects, in their 'naked ambition' of promoting English, project the

local people as 'in need of "help"', and their languages and lifeways are 'stigmatised as deficient, un-modern and irrelevant for cognitive or communicative ''development''', reverberating a colonial mind-set (Bunce *et al*., 2016, p. 7). Moreover, such projects, as put by several scholars (Phillipson, 1992, 2016; Pennycook, 1994; Widin, 2010; Seargeant and Erling, 2013; Tupas and Tabiola, 2017), promote English as a benign and instrumental tool for development, often ignoring local linguistic, socioeconomic and political realities and priorities. Tupas and Tabiola (2017) give example of a US funded English language project in Philippines that promoted English as a socioeconomically liberating force for the country, reinforcing locally unsuitable English monolingual ideology about the superiority of the native model of English. The project, they (pp. 415-417) say, 'obscured' yet also 'facilitated' the US military, political and economic control and interest in the country and provided 'ideological support for the development dimension of US presence in the Philippines'.

Bangladesh is a country in South Asia that comes strongly within the purview of the discourse of English for development, and led by the donors and supported by the state, English is actively promoted for development (Erling, 2017; Hamid and Erling, 2016). The country allocates very limited resources to its education sector, with the implication that it relies heavily on the aid of foreign donors for improvement of education, including English language education (Erling, 2017). The discourse of English as a language of international development persuades the state and the donors to view English language as a vehicle for the economic uplift of Bangladesh (Seargeant and Erling, 2011). ELT projects in Bangladesh such as 'English Language Teaching Improvement Project' (ELTIP) or 'Teaching Quality Improvement' (TQI), or more recently 'English in Action' (www.eiabd.com) which were funded by international donor agencies like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank or the UK's Department for International Development, strongly adhered to the developmental possibilities of the English language for Bangladesh (Erling, 2017).

This tension between on the one hand, the heavy promotion of English in countries like Bangladesh and on the other, disputes about English and development in the literature, makes it more urgent to listen to local discourses from the sites directly affected. One such important site, I argue, is madrasas in Bangladesh. Nearly 15 million people study or teach at madrasas in Bangladesh (Barkat *et al.*, 2017), and there are national and global programmes, particularly consolidated in the post 9/11 world, to reform madrasas with English for development and security (Bano, 2014; Karmani, 2005) (see §2 below). However, empirically gathered insights on English in madrasas, on madrasas and development, or on madrasas in general are scarce. This paper, responding to this paucity, presents the discourses of English for development at a private and unreformed Qawmi Madrasa (henceforth QM) and more briefly at a reformed and government-controlled Aliya Madrasa (henceforth AM) in rural Bangladesh. The greater focus here on the QM can be explained by the fact that because these madrasas are private and unreformed, their discourses are the *least* heard and understood, and they are less readily intelligible to well-established English and development discourses. At the same time, a discussion of the AM is important in order to show that there are also reformed madrasas such as the AM and the position in madrasas is varied. In sum, I will illustrate the madrasas that are furthest from the general mainstream, but it is also essential to show that there are efforts to compromise and to accommodate the differences, even though these efforts may not always be very successful.

'*How*' to hear the local discourses at madrasa is important. There is a prevalence of commissioned research in the donor-dominated English for development scene in the global South. Such commissioned research, where I have also previously worked, tend to be short, quantitative or briefly qualitative, and report-driven, and the researchers, as Hultgren et al. (2016) say, may also find it difficult to ignore the vested interest of the donors in English language teaching. In contrast, the study here employs linguistic ethnography in an independent doctoral project, arguing that such an approach offers better opportunity to be flexible, locally grounded and contextually nuanced when addressing the question of hearing the local views on English for development.

Overall, this paper interrogates the promotion of English for development in the global South by combining what I shall call 'reflexively traditional counter discourses' identified at the two madrasas

with Southern theories (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2012) (see §6 below). It shows that people in the QM occupy religious, reflexive and alternative ground, and resist economic success and western development programmes, mostly rejecting English as a language of development. People in the reformed AM identify English as an avenue of furthering material goals such as mainstream higher education and employment, but the possible actualisation of those goals are vulnerable to secular stigmas attached to madrasas in the society. The paper's findings question the discourse of English for development promoted in donor funded projects in the global South, and ask how aware or sensitive these projects are to these heterogenous, alternative and complex realities in the global South. With this background in place, I will first provide an overview of madrasas, followed by my research methodology. After that, I will present my findings at the two madrasas and lead to a conclusion.

2. Madrasas: A contested site

Madrasas are Islamic religious educational institutes where education on Quran, *Hadith* (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad) and Islamic law are offered. Madrasas are considered to preserve, nurture and convey Islamic traditions in the Muslim societies for generations (Noor *et al.*, 2008, p. 9). Moreover, according to Riaz (2008), they provide 'safety nets' to poor Muslims by providing free or low-cost education and lodging. The 9/11 attack in the US and the subsequent context of securitization generated widespread global attention to (South Asian) madrasas, thickening tension around them, associating them with terrorism, with the US/West viewing them as 'citadels of militancy or factories of *jihad*' (Riaz, 2008, p. 1; Karmani, 2005).

In the national contexts of politics, development and post 9/11 securitization, madrasas occupy a complex and marginalised position in Bangladesh (Riaz, 2008; Hamid, 2016). Bangladesh has a Muslim majority demographic profile. But an essentially secular nationalist spirit emerged by fighting with the Islam spirited (West) Pakistan through bloody historical episodes such as the Language Movement in 1952 or the War of Independence in 1971. This spirit asks madrasas existential questions, viewing them as an isolated educational system, suspecting their political, cultural and economic centres (see also Barkat *et al.* 2017). However, this position has been counterbalanced by the rise of political Islam ideology since the 1980s, by related Islamisation of the Bangladeshi society and by the popularity of Islamic education (Riaz, 2008). Madrasa education also faces frequent interrogation about whether it can nurture the exchangeable human capital among individuals necessary for the national economic growth of Bangladesh (see also the next paragraph) (Barkat *et al.*, 2017; Rao and Hossain, 2011). Concerns over religion-based extremism in post 9/11 Bangladesh have also produced suspicion around Bangladeshi madrasas, pushing them further to marginality (Bano, 2014; Hamid, 2016).

'Reformation' is a central discourse directed towards madrasas in the contemporary South Asian geopolitical climate. Aligning to a view of 'more English, less Islam', educational aid can be seen to be provided by the West/USA to countries in South Asia to reduce religious content in the madrasa curriculum, encouraging a broad modern curriculum that includes English (Karmani, 2005, p. 263). In Bangladesh, there are views that madrasa graduates should be drawn into globalisation, the 'modern economy' and the national economic development agenda (Rao and Hossain, 2011, p. 623). These discourses dovetail with the west-formulated but locally executed mechanism of 'reforming the Muslim mindset', part of the soft strategy of the war on terror (Bano, 2014, p. 912). Spearheaded by the state and reinforced by foreign donors, there are efforts in Bangladesh, including a $100 million programme in 2011, to reform madrasas with English, mathematics, and science to make them more open to western values and ideals (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2010; BBC, 2011; Bano, 2014). The project of reformation of madrasas has become successful with the aliya madrasas but it has been received critically by the qawmi madrasas (Bano, 2014).

Despite the likely significance for them of these discourses of development and securitization, little is known about English in madrasas. Hamid (2016) says that there are hegemonic discourses in

Bangladesh that madrasa students have low proficiency in English and their English proficiency achievement is devalued in the higher educational and professional linguistic markets of Bangladesh.

To sum up: Madrasas occupy an ambivalent position – popular in Muslim societies on the one hand, and on the other, viewed with a suspicion shaped by some of the national and global flows. English is enmeshed with hegemonic discourses which interrogate madrasas and advocate their development, and this makes it important for ELT and applied linguistics to start to hear and understand madrasa voices.

3. Research methodology

To understand local ecologies, to analyse how dominant discourses are taken up at the local level and to identify local discourses that do not circulate widely, this project draws on linguistic ethnography, situating language closely within social life (Rampton, 2010).

Data for the project have been collected at a Qawmi and an Aliya madrasa in a rural mid-eastern subdistrict in Bangladesh over a period of six months. Especially at the QM, gaining access was challenging because of my identity as an English language teacher at a secular spirited university in Dhaka city doing a Ph.D. at a university in the West. Building rapport with the people in the madrasas was therefore crucial and this was largely achieved by complying with the local religious and cultural expectations[1] (e.g. wearing Islamic dress).

The study combined interviews, group discussions, observations and document analysis as its means to collect data. Seventy seven participants from the two madrasas took part in the interviews and group discussions, predominantly involving students and teachers but also ex-students and parents. The interviews and group discussions were conducted in Bangla and were audio-recorded. All the oral data were fully transcribed verbatim, an essential task in the representation of the participants' voices. The processed data were coded, manually and with help from digital software (i.e. NVivo), which facilitated the analysis of the data based on themes. These themes covered wide range of issues but aligned broadly with the areas of language, development and religion.

4. The Qawmi Madrasa (QM): Rejecting English as a language of development

The Qawmi Madrasa (QM), a residential madrasa for males, is the biggest qawmi madrasa in the local area and it offers Islamic education from level one to the graduate level. The participants commonly identified religious commitment in the family as the most salient reason why they came to study there. Moreover, the perceived high expenses of studying at schools that their poor families cannot afford also influenced them to seek to madrasas as a low-cost solution for education. There was also a covert view that some parents view madrasas as a ready-to-hand resort to educate and discipline the academically less able and unmotivated child.

English is taught at the madrasa at the primary level (till the QM level four[2]) as an academic subject. There is, however, provision for an extra-curricular English course for the secondary level students to increase their English communicative abilities.

Drawing on their religion, people in the QM mainly rejected the idea of English as a language of economic advancement. They talked to me as individuals navigating beliefs and professional needs

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[1] Given the context of the fieldwork, ethics was a critical issue to deal with. Ethical measures addressed to informed consent and privacy tried to be sensitive to the local contextual realities.

[2] The levels at the QM differ from the levels at the mainstream schools. Students were often considerably older and of mixed ages than their equivalent mainstream levels.

within the madrasa, but they were also villagers in the local community and citizens of Bangladesh. Hence, they shifted the frame sometimes, and considered how English and development fitted into the wider society beyond the madrasa, questioning its hegemony and efficacy. They also envisaged a global role for English in world-wide Islamic proselytization or international economic migration. These global connections were mostly imagined rather than known or experienced at first-hand, but they can still be seen as an alternative plan for global English.

4.1 'Life dedicated to *din*' and resisting English for economic progress

People in the QM, grounded on their principle of *din* meaning religion or Islam, resisted English as a language of economic development. They had a dominant belief that *din* is far more significant and desirable than economic prosperity in the *duniya* (the material world), shaping centrally why they are studying or teaching at madrasa. 30 among 34 participants in the QM said in interviews that their intention of life (*maksad*) is spiritual solace, not material embellishment. Risalat (21), student, said upholding their dedication to *din*:

> Your money and wealth will be of no use when you will die. Only the education that you pursue at qawmi madrasas will be of use. That's why the teachers and students in qawmi madrasas are little after money. If we cared, then for 5000/10000 taka (GBP50/100), we would not teach at madrasas or do *imamati* (leading mosques) at mosques. We would rather work at garments (industry) then or do (general) jobs or something else and earn 20000/30000/40000 taka. Even after knowing it, we do not do that. We have one single purpose.
>
> (Risalat[3]-interview-QM)

Positioning them under this overarching spiritual principle of *din*, people in the QM largely declined viewing English as a language of economic progress. They said that associating English with any economic possibility conflicts with their core life philosophy of *din*, giving me examples of persons in the QM who know English well and yet who do not channel those skills to advance any material purposes. English, seen through the lens of *din*, as put by several participants, is like Portuguese or Malay or any other language to them, not receiving any extra importance because of its possible economic value. Ahsan (40), teacher, said:

> Learning languages may create opportunities for earning money. But we do not want to do that. In the present age, the main purpose of the national education policy is to gain solvency, to earn money. That is not our *maksad* (intention). The main purpose of education is to become an ideal human being, not earning money. Those of us who come to madrasas, we learn or teach English for Islam since our life is dedicated to *din*. We don't learn English for earning money in the *duniya*.
>
> (Ahsan-interview-QM)

Looking beyond interview statements to practices, their religion bound resistance to English for development can also be grasped by looking at how they treated *me* during the fieldwork. This is significant because studying for a Ph.D. in the UK and being a teacher of English at a university in Dhaka, I was likely to be an instantiation of 'English for development in Bangladesh' to the participants, representing what English and national development could mean at an individualised level. I found that the participants did not attach any discernible importance to my academic and professional background with the English language or my related social, cultural or economic profile and expression. This was contrary to what I commonly experience: people in Bangladesh (including the people in the AM) usually find my urban and university-based affiliation to English valuable and sometimes exploitable.[4] Many of the participants, regardless of their age or position, asked me to pray

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[3] All the participants are called by their pseudonyms.

[4] It is common for people to ask me for suggestions to improve their or their children's English abilities, attributing to me a position of value. At many educational institutes that I visit, people usually treat me with esteem as a potential resource and request me at times to give an English class or two to their students.

saying that my material attainments are rather pointless and transient, or that my material pre-occupation with English does not help me to succeed in the world hereafter such as the grave where Arabic is used. Even both the English teachers whose classes I observed, had little interest to talk with me about English or teaching English. They rather were more inclined to talk about religion or to try to discipline me religiously, telling me that I should keep the beard or keep my trousers to a religiously appropriate length. Committed to their religious ideal of *din*, people in the QM mostly found me irrelevant and easily refuted within the religious path they had taken, abstaining from material allures that included English.

This rejection of English and development based on religious ideology marks a contrast to the widespread view that people in the global South have strong ideologies of English as a ladder of economic progress (Rasool, 2007; Hamid and Erling, 2016; also see Chowdhury and Erling, in press). This is important because folk ideologies of English are a central force in the promotion of English and development, motivating states and donors to see English as necessary for national development even when hard evidence linking the two is very hard to find.

In addition to their spirituality-based resistance, the actual economic value of English in, for example, career progression in an Islamic professional stream was deemed limited. This was because, as the participants commonly told me, Islamic jobs primarily required Arabic, as well as Urdu and Farsi in the regional context to understand Quran, Hadith and other Islamic religious texts, and then mostly Bangla and Arabic to communicate with Bangladeshis for religious purposes. English does not have any recognisable economic significance in this multilingualism of Islamic professions. Baki (19), student, said in interview: 'When I will go back to my village to serve Islam, people will prefer Arabic. To explain any Islamic issue, Bangla and Arabic are used. English is very little...To do the *tafsir* (interpretation) of Quran and Hadith, English is not required much'. Given that English is often viewed as the *de facto* language of career advancements, and the economic value of English in the labour market is one of the strongest currents of English and development explorations (Erling and Seargeant, 2013), this counter linguistic market seems significant.

Aligning closely with religion as individuals in madrasa, people in the QM generally rejected economic prosperity, and found English for economic gain discourse ideologically incompatible and professionally inconsequential. These findings, however, should not be overgeneralised and there were some discrepant viewpoints. They included some young students who shared views that earning is not blameworthy, especially if that comes by *halal* (allowed/prescribed in Islam) means. Fahim (18), student, said in interview: 'To do any good work is not a *gunah* (sin). After becoming an *alem* (Islamic scholar), I might get a job at a madrasa with a salary of 10,000-12,000 taka. I will do that job. But my purpose must not be earning money. The purpose has to be to satisfy Allah'. Congruous to such more flexible stance to material progress, several participants shared their belief that learning English can be economically viable for people in madrasas in the form of commercial private tuition in English along with Arabic for young people outside the madrasa.

4.2 'Why do you give so much importance to English?': Reflexive questioning of the hegemony of English and development

People in the QM had comparative and critical views about English and/or development in the wider social context of Bangladesh. These views are important because NGO discourses make assumptions about the quality of rural life, and English and development literature also tend to align with mainstream society. I will first present how the QM participants view 'development' in the society in general.

The QM informants frame economic development in the greater society outside the madrasa rather competitively by drawing in their own orientation to *din*. They subscribe to a *din* fraternity of economic wellbeing that they dichotomise and separate from the worldly/material (*duniyabi*) version of economic success. In essence, their argument was that even though their incomes are often limited, madrasa education helps them access desirable Islamic jobs. Moreover, they can sustain their adherence to *din* in their family economies because their religion abiding families have low material expectations from them, and in addition, informed by Islamic education, they themselves exhibit good care and responsibility to their families regardless of their financial (limited) abilities. Overall, a religious reliance on Allah for provision and a belief that He provides *barkat* (blessings) seem to infuse a sense of material and family well-being on a limited income with peace and solace. Shahadat (60), teacher, told me that even though his monthly salary is only 9000 taka, 'Allah feeds his family', and his wife and children are happy, never making 'the slightest sound of complaint' about his income. In contrast, QM people often lamented, in the wider society many materially-minded people educated in mainstream secular education, are in restless and strenuous pursuit of prosperity. Since mainstream education is often expensive due to the need for extra private tuition and competition and corruption make access to general/secular jobs precarious, economic success often remains uncertain and compromising. In addition, material aspirations make families demanding, further intensifying the tension and worries in their lives.

Western development programmes in the society as a whole, often funded by international donor agencies, and usually in operation through local and national NGOs, also faced critical reception in the madrasa. From a religious angle, people in the QM were generally critical of the way these programmes operated on bank interest system that is prohibited in Islam, and inculcated Christian values among poor rural Muslims with substantial financial backing. Moreover, these programmes facilitated the participation of women in non-domestic economic spheres, subverting religious and cultural norms in rural societies. Beyond these religious objections, there were views questioning the practical validity of these programmes, seeing them as an unforgiving mechanism that, among other criticisms, furthered western economic, political and scientific agendas. Hamid (18), secondary level student, said:

> In our area, they (NGO) say that 'the land is yours and the harvest is also yours. We will give fertilisers and technology'. Why? 'We will experiment whether there is more harvest or less harvest'. There are many harms in it, but not everyone is understanding this. The loss of the country is that the things that they use, for example, fertilisers, seeds, and others are brought from their countries. Previously, the rural people used to manage the land by using maximum two or three types of fertilisers. Now, they are using 10/12 types of fertilisers and they are using them a lot (in quantity). Because of this, our fertile lands are getting barren. Now, these lands are yielding us good harvests but in 10/12 years, they (NGO) would take as much money as they need to make houses (in their country) and they would go back after fulfilling their purposes. One day a situation will come that even after having big lands, we will not be able to produce our necessary food for the year from these lands. Then you will be bound to beg to the foreign countries. This is a great loss for our country.
>
> (Hamid-group discussion-QM)

Seeing the wider society as embroiled in an unguaranteed and stressful chase for material success and western development programmes intervening rather unjustifiably, people at the QM believed that English has a hegemonic and divisive presence which also questions madrasas. More than a third of the 34 QM participants told me voluntarily in interviews that English has an unwarrantedly hegemonic presence in Bangladesh, disrupting the local/rural linguistic ecology and stratifying the social participation of people based on their varied proficiencies in English. Masum (26), teacher, said:

> …this is a matter of regret that I must tell you that general (mainstream) educated people, when they talk, more than half of the time, they speak English. When some ministers of our country speak in the talk shows, we don't understand much of it. It's because he said the whole thing in English to the journalists. People in the country don't understand that. How many people are educated in our country? So, I think he is talking to people who are like him. The rest of the people need not understand. But for this language (Bangla), even

blood had been shed. We should use this language (Bangla) more. We are using the language of foreign countries (English). I find this a matter of regret. When someone uses an English word, then if I speak an Arabic word? Then if he says, 'what have you said?', I will reply, 'what have *you* said?' […] We know several languages. We can mix all these languages. We don't use any Arabic words when we talk with you. Then why do you use English words? Why do you give so much importance to this language? This is a question of mine to you. Please give me an answer.

Qumrul: I don't know.

Masum: Why will you not have an answer? You must find an answer.

<div align="right">(Masum-interview-QM)</div>

Looking at the above extract, it seems Masum views me as an instantiation of the English using people in the wider society and through me, takes the opportunity to interrogate what he sees as the divisive dominance of English in Bangladesh. From his example of ministers speaking in English in public domains, he thinks that English obfuscates the access to information and political participation of poor and low educated people who do not know English. He also positions himself counter-actively, proposing that as the general/mainstream educated people use English in their communication practices, people in madrasas can also use Arabic to contest English if they want, further undermining linguistic unity in the country. By asking *me* repetitively and forcefully 'give me an answer', it seems that he has strong resentments that incorporate linguistic nationalism and target the minister and the general/mianstream educated people who sustain a hegemony of English, accusing them of excluding a large group of people in the society as well as madrasas.

In addition to social division, many of the older students and teachers felt that there was little room for alternative educational and linguistic visions in the widespread and uncritical celebration of English as a language of quality education and material advancement. Pointing to the socio-political complexities and contingencies in Bangladesh, several of the participants doubted whether learning English would automatically accrue materially favourable outcomes for Bangladeshis. Shameem (35), teacher, said in interview that 'the condition of Bangladesh is such that even if you have studied well and know English and all, …. if you don't have "*mama*" (maternal uncle, also used figuratively to mean economic/political influence), you will not get jobs'. Moreover, several participants said that many people at the local and national levels use a hegemonic English lens to ask stigmatising questions about the quality of madrasa education (also see the AM section). Possibly viewing me as someone representing those people, Ahsan, senior teacher, told me at the very first meeting with him:

A few days ago, I saw in a video that a reporter went to a qawmi madrasa and interviewed a few people at the madrasa. But they cut and edited the interviews, and then they showed it. The reporter said, 'the condition of English is very bad at qawmi madrasas. What do the qawmi madrasa students study? Their students do not know English'. But did they want to know why we do not know English, or why we do not need English? Now, how about you go to a (mainstream) school or college, and ask the students if they know Arabic, the language of the Quran and Hadith? They will not be able to answer. The reporter could come and ask us if we know Arabic and *tafsir* (interpretation of Quran) very well. If we did not know them well, then they could have questioned us. Arabic and *tafsir* are our **main** (*bold indicates English in original*). Instead, they asked us how much English we know. This is a request from us to you that please don't make a report like this.

<div align="right">(Ahsan-fieldnote-QM)</div>

4.3 English within an alternative global plan: Proselytization and economic migration

People in the QM gave English a role in some of their alternative global imagining, featuring in areas such as international economic migration and global Islamic proselytization. These discourses deserve attention because globalisation, particularly the globalised economy, is at the forefront of some of the discussions in English and development (Erling and Seargeant, 2013; English in Action, 2017). Because of its lubricating role to many global Southern economies including Bangladesh,

international low/semi-skilled economic migration is one such globalised domain where the value of English is increasingly explored (e.g. Erling *et al.*, 2015).

The madrasa was situated in an area where the local people have a strong tendency of labour migration to the Middle East. As a result, even though the people in the QM themselves seldom aspired to economic migration, they still had views about the comparative values of languages in labour migration. Grounded in a belief that proficiency in local language(s) is consequential for the migrant workers, they commonly shared thoughts that English is useful in 'English (speaking) countries', but largely not as a lingua franca in non-Anglophone contexts of economic migration. It seems that this position was shaped by the belief that proficiency in Arabic (including Arabic written skills) provides an indispensable advantage to migrant workers, including madrasa students, in the Arab countries. In the words of Kader (35), teacher:

> Many of our madrasa students go (to the Arab countries). I know someone who worked for 29 years at Medina. He worked as a home caretaker. He told me, 'whether you are English educated or whatever educated, you will not have any value to the people who are the original Arabs'. If you can explain anything in Arabic to them, then you will have value.

> (Kader-interview-QM)

The other international arena worth mentioning is global Islamic proselytization (*Tableeg/Dawat*) which occupies the foremost place in the QM participants' Islamic sense of internationalism. People in the QM viewed English as a potentially useful language to spread the message of Islam in the world. At the same time, they also thought that Arabic and Urdu are more frequently used for proselytization among the global Muslim communities.

Stepping back, we can say that people in the Qawmi Madrasa rejected the discourse of English for economic development, drawing in their key religious value that spiritual pursuit is more important than material prosperity. English for development discourse conflicts with the core fabric of their madrasa/religious existence, and they resisted it with conviction, even though a minority thought that English could have nominal economic value for their career advancements. They also positioned themselves reflexively in the broader society, beyond the madrasa. They questioned the complexity engrained in the mainstream/material version of economic progress, contrasting this with an approach to economic well-being closely linked to spiritual modesty. Moreover, they perceived western development programmes as a violent force opposing the local living agreed by people's religion and culture. English, they contended, has a hegemonic and dividing status in society and its ubiquitous identification with economic progress marginalises madrasas. However, people at the QM did allocate a position for English in some of their alternative global visions, seeing the language as generally useful for international economic migration or global Islamic proselytization. Even so, the value they attributed to Arabic, for work in the Middle East and for spreading Islam in the world, offset any uncontested global value of English.

Looking at how people in the QM took positions on English and development, it would be wrong to characterise them as backward traditionalists. Instead, they should be seen reflexive and critical traditionalists, well-tuned to contemporary discourses of development, globalisation and the English language. This is a form of traditionalism, I argue, that is not locked ignorantly into the past but is instead aware of modernist alternatives but has mostly rejected them. People in the QM seem to self-consciously embrace religion in opposition to the material and representational regimes of the state and the West which they see as putting them at serious disadvantages. As the way that they treated me during the fieldwork makes clear, they were reflexively aware of my discursive lineage, showing that I was no Martian to them. But they had taken a different path within the same social, political and epistemic field as me. When they rejected discourses related to development or the English language, the rejections were more a matter of *dissent* than *distance*. The reflexive traditionalism of the people in the QM provides a central platform not only for interrogating English and development discourses, but also for arguing for the need to de-exoticise madrasa.

This reflexive traditionalism leads us further to understand that people in the QM have an alternative 'Centre' in their lives. Essentially aligned to *din* as a belief and mode of living, they find some of the language and development quests, practices and interventions in the wider mainstream society problematic. At a global level, through proselytization and economic migration, they position themselves closely to the Muslim *ummah*. Arabic but also Bangla and Urdu linguistically also consolidate their alternative positioning. People in the QM seem to orient to an alternative geo- and econo-linguistic Centre, largely in contrast to the material/western world and the English language.

The QM's rejection of English and development from a critically reflexive traditionalist stance, occupying an alternative linguistic and developmental vantage point, is not however the only madrasa discourse. There are also state controlled reformed madrasas such as the Aliya Madrasa (AM), and their discourses of English and development are different, to which I now turn.

5. The Aliya Madrasa (AM): Frustrated English aspirations?

The Aliya Madrasa (AM) is a reformed, government regulated, semi-residential madrasa situated in the same rural sub-district as the QM. The madrasa offers modern subjects integrated with Islamic education from primary (*Ibtedayi*) to the tertiary (*Fazil*) level. The students, unlike the QM, include males and females, and their ages roughly range from 6 to 25 years. The students, like the QM students, attributed studying at the madrasa mainly to religious commitment but also poverty. In addition, a modified religious idea that it is possible to study both religious and modern subjects seemed to have influenced many of them to study at an aliya madrasa – seeing it a halfway solution between going to a qawmi madrasa or a school. The overall penetration of Islamic studies and activities at the AM appeared less to me than what I saw in the QM.

5.1 Does reformation provide access to mainstream markets?

Reformation is a central issue that differentiates the AM from the QM. It also lies at the forefront of the reservations that people in the QM held about the aliya madrasas in Bangladesh. The curriculum of the aliya madrasas has undergone reformation by the state in several phases, including in 2013 when the value of English and Bangla was doubled at the secondary level. Students were required to study two papers in English and two in Bangla instead of what they were studying before – one paper in English and one in Bangla. Most of the student participants generally viewed the recent reformation positively, saying that it would amplify their opportunities in national markets. However, there were also concerns that over the years, the unplanned inclusion of many modern/secular subjects and the exclusion of several Islamic subjects from the AM curriculum had made the aliya madrasa curriculum unnecessarily bulky, and also decreased the authority of aliya madrasas as Islamic academic institutions.

Reformation provides the people in the AM, unlike their QM counterparts, with access to mainstream higher education and employment, but most of the participants spoke of facing discrimination in these areas. They said that many people in the wider society stigmatise and hold negative stereotypes about madrasas, and many people in mainstream organisations and universities devalue their madrasa certificates, disrupting their access and opportunities. The following excerpt from a group discussion among the tertiary level students in the AM gives an idea of this line of belief:

> Shaon: I want to build a career in government services so that I can be a government officer and work for the development of the country. But currently in the territory of Bangladesh, certificates of our madrasa boards? **Not allowed.**
>
> Hasnat: Yes.

Shaon: **Not allowed.**

Qumrul: In the job market?

Shaon: Whether in the job market or anywhere. I have had experiences in several places. I have seen that they do not accept the madrasa certificates. Moreover, if you look at the government and read the newspapers, then you should be better informed than me that the government even though says that the (madrasa) certificate is equivalent to general (educational) certificates, but, in reality, we are viewed with *neglect*.

(Group discussion 2-AM)

5.2 English for economic development but…

Participants in the AM, unlike their QM counterparts, largely identified English as a language of material benefits. Enabled by reformation, mainstream higher education and employment are the two areas where their aspirations for economic prosperity by learning English seemed to be concentrated. However, the AM participants commonly said that as many people stigmatise madrasas, they (people) also generally see studying at a madrasa as the opposite of gaining good proficiency in English. As a result, English is a critical area where their vulnerability to dominant secular ideologies gets momentum, and they face English-based discrimination at mainstream/secular-minded organisations and universities. They frequently gave the example of aliya madrasa students who passed the *Alim* (higher secondary) examination being denied access to study subjects like English or International Relations in several public universities in Bangladesh because they studied one subject in English whereas the mainstream students study two. These universities imposed decisions that the participants found discriminatory because they ignored the English performance of the madrasa students in the university admission tests, or ruled out the possibility that studying one subject in English is probably justifiable in a religion-specialised curriculum approved by the state (see also Hamid, 2016). Khaled (18), a secondary level student, lamented:

> We study in a madrasa. When our seniors go to study in public universities, then it's found that they (universities) blame the madrasa students. There is only one reason. They studied in madrasas, so they had 100 marks for English (one subject in English). People in (mainstream) schools and colleges also think they (aliya madrasa students) studied in madrasas, so they know little English and they don't give much importance to English. That's why even if they (aliya madrasa students) know English, they are viewed negatively. There are some good students from our madrasa who also know very good English. Despite this fact, they were not given subjects of their choices at Dhaka, Jagannath and Jahangirnagar universities because they studied at madrasas […] There is a common tendency among people that they care us little because of English. But people don't know that madrasa students also know English. They are not totally stupid. This has been proved at the admission tests of different universities.
>
> (Khaled-group discussion 1-AM)

In views such as these, English is seen as a political excuse to block the access of madrasa students: in Shaon's formulation, English works as a '*bahana*' (colloquial Bangla meaning 'excuse') for many universities/organisations to deny the madrasa students. Elsewhere, Tofael, teacher, said in interview that secular ideologist public universities treat the madrasa students like a 'step-mother' and this becomes particularly discernible when it comes to English.

Reformation promises the people in the AM access to national markets such as mainstream higher education and employment, and they consider English proficiency valuable for their success in those domains. However, they speak of stigma attached to madrasas, and of people in madrasas facing discriminations at secular-minded organizations and universities. Their status as reformed institutions that include English distinguishes them from the unreformed Qawmi Madrasa (QM), but it fails to have much impact on these dominant ideologies. Rather, English can be used to fuel negative stereotypes of madrasas and to deny some of the economic advantages promised by reformation. As

affected by reformation, English ushers in hopes of economic success among the people in the AM, but subject to socio-political cracks and contingencies, it does not seem to necessarily deliver success.

6. Conclusion

By describing the alternative and complex realities of English for development at two madrasas in rural Bangladesh, this paper argues that there is a set of local discourses that the donor funded projects are ignorant of. It shows that people in the Qawmi Madrasa present a complex array of alternatives in terms of economic advancement, western development programmes, linguistic markets (Arabic and Bangla), linguistic hegemony, globalism, and importantly, intellectual stances (reflexive critical traditionalism). Taking account of the AM discourses of English based stigma, the research suggests that for certain people, the route of English mediated success can be obstructed by dominant social and political ideologies.

The study raises questions about how aware programmes promoting English for development are to the religiously grounded alternative aspirations of the people in the QM, reflexively and critically defying the discourse of English for development. Or how alert benign promises of learning English for economic development are to the local socio-political entanglements involved in the processes capable of realising them. According to Southern Theory (Connell, 2007; Santos, 2012), many classical theories and theories of globalisation are constructed from global Northern points of view, ignoring indigenous realities and priorities in the global South. Santos says that 'the understanding of the world is much broader than the Western understanding of the world', which often fails to grasp adequately the infinite 'diversity of the world' and 'immensity of alternatives' (Santos, 2012, p. 51). Several scholars argue that English is often promoted in donor-funded projects that either lack or ignore local socio-political, linguistic, educational and cultural knowledge (Phillipson, 2016; Widin, 2010; Pennycook, 1994). The research here raises the question: where and how do we position madrasa discourses like these when we talk about English for development, globally and in the national context of Bangladesh?

Millions of people study or teach at madrasas and this study presents the findings at two Bangladeshi madrasas, making it important not to overgeneralise the voices that I listened to. Nevertheless, this study provides applied linguistics with a long-missing empirical corpus of locally-grounded, counter-hegemonic perspectives, raising some serious questions about the promotion of English for development, arguing for the need to situate this discourse in the global South amidst the subtleties and nuances of heterogenous southern experiences and realities. In doing so, the paper maybe gives a necessary shake, however small, to the oft-problematised hegemony of global English, potentially emboldening the shake, providing an example of one of the most substantial ways – hitherto neglected – in which this can be done.

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