

Dreams and Realities:

Developing Countries and the English Language

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Paper 11

English and development in Eritrea

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Introduction

A number of chapters in this volume (e.g. Williams 2011, Chapter 3 this volume) reiterate the currently held view of development as encompassing both economic growth and human development, with economic growth as one means by which human development can be achieved rather than an end in itself. Djité (2008) notes that the concept of human development has become progressively wider in statements made by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and now includes not only education, health care and good governance, but also issues such as empowerment, sustainability, co-operation, culture and language, together with a recognition that human development is concerned not just with individuals but also with how they interact in communities. Djité points out that: 'language constitutes the common thread that links all of these aspects together' (2008:175). In its 1996 and 2000 reports, the UNDP warned that the imposition of a dominant language in the name of nation-building could be seen as a culturally repressive form of development leading to the destruction of other cultures and the favouring of an elite, and called for a 'three-language formula' for multilingual states, which would allow for mother tongue use in education and government, as well as a national lingua franca and an international language (UNDP 1996, 2000; see also Laitin 1992).

In Eritrea, this 'three-language formula' can be seen in operation, but it appears to be working in a different way to that described in a number of the other chapters in this book, and if English is the 'international language' in this trilingual system, its role in development is harder to define in the light of the particular economic and social conditions in the country. We will argue that in addition to, and in many cases rather than, fulfilling instrumental needs such as employability, international collaboration, accessing information and international mobility (Coleman 2010) it is acting in a more nebulous, less easily described fashion as a channel for global cultural flows (with their attached values and practices), as a means of lessening isolation and linking local and diasporic Eritrean communities, and to fulfil future aspirations as much if not more than current needs. We will argue that the impetus for learning English is happening more as part of an individually motivated, bottom-

up grass roots movement rather than at a macro governmental level. We will also show that the connections made by individuals between learning English and their own development differ from the connections they make between development and the country of Eritrea.

The current linguistic landscape in Eritrea

Eritrea has nine indigenous languages, including Semitic languages such as Tigrinya, Cushitic languages such as Bilen and Bedawiyet, and Nilo-Saharan languages such as Nara and Kunama (Lewis 2009). Arabic is also spoken along the Red Sea coast and on the border with Sudan. Tigrinya is spoken as a first language by at least half the population. There is no official language, though Tigrinya and Arabic predominate in commerce and public life and are de facto working languages. In the capital, Asmara, Tigrinya predominates in public life while Arabic is used as a second language by many people living in the lowlands. Arabic plays an important role in the public sphere, particularly in the western lowlands, and is taught as a subject in schools in that area. The government has an ambivalent attitude to Arabic, possibly because it is perceived as possessing the potential to polarise Eritrean society, although it is also viewed as a useful communicative resource (Kibreab 2009). As our data will show, English is currently used to some extent in public life within Eritrea, mainly to communicate with foreigners encountered during the course of work and to read manuals written in English. A number of older Eritreans can still speak some Italian, a legacy of Italian colonisation until 1941, and there is an Alliance Française in Asmara where people can study French, which accounts for references to these languages in the data we will refer to later in this chapter.

If we match the 'three-language formula' which we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter to language use in Eritrea, the 'mother tongue' is clearly linked to local areas, villages and neighbourhoods and to elementary education. The use and development of all nine of Eritrea's indigenous languages are encouraged at the local level, and children at elementary school are taught in their mother tongue. This has involved quite a lot of expenditure by the government as languages such as Bilen and Nara have needed to be standardised and written down, and textbooks produced. The policy of teaching local languages at primary school has been and remains contentious with some parents feeling that, as children learn their mother tongue at home, school time would be better devoted to teaching children through the medium of Tigrinya or Arabic, the latter especially in areas that border on regions where Arabic is spoken. One of our interviewees felt that 'we are imprisoning ourselves and our children by teaching the mother tongue at primary school' and this topic is hotly debated in English, Tigrinya and Arabic on internet sites such as Asmarino and My Awate (www.asmarino.com and www.awate.com respectively) as well as by writers such as Woldemikael (2003) and Hailemariam (2002). English is the medium of instruction in all junior and high schools. There are a few elite private schools in Asmara which teach through the medium of English, only accessible to the very rich, but all children have access to state secondary education through English. Parents realise the importance of education, although the final years of high school may be less well attended for a number of reasons. The English proficiency of teachers, teaching methodology and student participation were good, even in very

remote areas, when observed by one of the writers some five years ago (Belay et al. 2007), although there have been recent changes in teacher training and school administration which may have changed the picture.

In terms of the 'three-language formula', Tigrinya has operated as the lingua franca between different ethnic groups ever since Eritrea was established as an independent nation state in 1993. In order to secure government jobs or indeed jobs in the commercial sector English is not a necessity, and it is not a language associated with political power. Trade with other countries is currently very low and the World Bank (2009) reports that 'the risk of macroeconomic instability, the use of price controls, regulations and rationing, particularly of foreign exchange, create an unfavourable business environment'. This economic situation does not encourage the growth of commercial enterprise on anything more than a very small local level and this lessens the need for international communication in English, or indeed any other international language, for business purposes. Very few students go abroad to study in English-speaking countries. It could therefore be argued that English does not have very high actual capital in the present 'linguistic market' (Bourdieu 1991) of Eritrea. Yet the number of adults wishing to learn English at the British Council in Asmara has increased significantly since 2006; it seems then that the perceived capital of English is very high. So what precisely are the attitudes to English in Eritrea, and why do individuals and organisations voluntarily seek to improve their proficiency in it, if it appears that it is not essential for employability, study or business?

To answer this question, we need to consider a number of recent historical events in Eritrea and also to consider the wider African and global context for English use. Many of the chapters in this book (e.g. Williams 2011) as well as many of the articles in a forthcoming special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (e.g. Omoniyi forthcoming) have alluded to the dangers of using exoglossic European languages which are ill understood by the majority of the population for development purposes in African countries, particularly in the fields of education and access to research and information. Yet even the most powerful arguments for the use of indigenous languages in these spheres acknowledge that ex-colonial languages such as English have a part to play in a multilingual African state:

African linguistic identity has never been affirmed through the denial of linguistic difference, and the richness of diversity must not be limited to indigenous languages. It will have to be extended to the European languages.
(Djité 2008:178)

European languages have been part of the fabric of everyday life in Eritrea for a long time. Italian, the language of colonisers from 1896 to 1941, seems to have lost any repressive connections today and operates instead as a rather fashionable language in the capital Asmara, preserved in the names of many institutions such as the 'Casa degli Italiani', the 'Cinema Impero' and 'Pace Electronics', in the pasta and cappuccinos available everywhere, and the presence of a small Italian community. English has been used as a medium of education in Eritrea through successive periods of colonisation in the 20th century by the Italians, the British and the Ethiopians. People became even more interested in learning English during

the period when the United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) had a number of peacekeepers in Eritrea (2000–2008) who communicated among themselves and with the local population through the medium of English.

But by 2009 the peacekeepers had departed as had most NGOs and tourists, meaning that the number of foreigners in Eritrea with whom the local population might use English is now negligible. Moreover, following recent political events such as the UN sanctions imposed in December 2009, many outside agencies have remarked on Eritrea's increased isolation from the global community: the *Financial Times* called it 'the insular state' (Jopson 2009) while the International Crisis Group has referred to it as 'the siege state' (ICG 2010). A number of our interviewees have commented on a growing 'anti-Western stance' on the part of the government, who 'undoubtedly feel let down by the paucity of the international efforts to secure Ethiopian compliance with the boundary decision' (Reid 2009:154) and have felt that this may affect its attitude to English as being associated with the West. Yet how isolated can any country truly be in today's global village, and why are increasing numbers of Eritreans seeking to learn English, including larger numbers of self-financing students from private enterprises, given the restrictions placed on economic development and foreign trade? Why is the government still concerned to maintain the quality of English teaching, as evinced for example in the National Conference for Improving the Quality of English Teaching in 2005, in its language policy for secondary education, and also its support for government officials learning English at the British Council?

Isolated or part of global cultural flows?

For us, the answer seems to lie in the strength of the imagined Eritrean community and in the global cultural flows which travel by means of satellite TV and the internet, linking territorial Eritrea to its diaspora and to global networks and discourses. These cultural flows in Eritrea through Appadurai's (1996) 'mediascape' are effected very largely through the medium of English (Sky, CNN, BBC, Fox), although also to an increasing extent through Arabic (e.g. Al Jazeera). Every bar and restaurant in the capital and many homes throughout Eritrea (and also in community spaces such as schools in remote rural areas) have satellite TV broadcasting programmes in English as a gentle background to all the other activities happening in these spaces, although internet access outside the capital is almost non-existent. Within Asmara every street has innumerable internet cafes which are patronised by large numbers of young people, even if the connections are painfully slow. Much has been made of the fact that the internet is increasingly in other languages than English (Crystal 2006), and yet the informal observations of one of the writers, who frequented a number of internet cafes in Asmara over a 48-hour period in October 2010, showed that the greatest amount of internet use was in English and focused on networking sites such as Facebook, which enabled global contacts to take place. Many of these appeared to be with attractive Eritrean members of the opposite sex who lived in other countries! When we speak of 'Eritrea', we are speaking of an 'imagined community' in which four million people may be in Eritrea, but at a conservative estimate, a figure of over one million are living abroad, mainly in North America and Europe (Hepner and Conrad 2005). A large number use Sudan and Ethiopia as a first staging post, but their ultimate

goal is to settle in the West. The World Bank estimated that in 2005 the diaspora accounted for 19.3 per cent of the population, the highest percentage per capita in Africa (Kifle 2009). Five years on, it is now likely to be a larger percentage. According to one writer, Jopson (2009):

At least 43,000 people voted against the regime with their feet last year ... Eritrea was the second-biggest source of asylum seekers in the world, according to the UN, a striking position for a country with the world's 113th biggest population.

At the present time Eritrea is at the top of the league of migrant-generating countries and therefore has one of the fastest growing diasporas in the world (Kheir 2010).

A study by Koser (2002) found that most Eritreans living abroad maintained contact with their relatives, while Kifle, in a recent survey of 208 Eritreans living in Germany, found that over 50 per cent sent remittances in cash or kind back for altruistic reasons to close family members still living in Eritrea. As Anderson says (1991:6):

A nation is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

This is doubly true if many of your friends and family, as well as fellow Eritreans unknown to you, but still part of your nation, are living separated from the homeland in space and time, although you are connected with them by phone and internet. The 'imagined community' might be far from the reality. The streets are definitely not paved with gold for recent migrants, who, since 2000, have been younger and less well educated, have left for political as well as economic reasons and have had a tougher time in their journey than earlier waves of immigrants (Arnone 2008). However, for those still in Eritrea, the Western consumer world which reaches them via satellite TV, combined with their memories of less isolated times, may well colour their views of what it is like 'out there' for Eritrean migrants.

It is obvious that language proficiency plays a part in employability in the receiving country. Language proficiency is also linked to level of education, especially since tertiary education is conducted in English in Eritrea. The 2009 UNDP Human Development Report states that 36 per cent of Eritrean migrants are educated to less than upper secondary level, 39 per cent have been educated to post-secondary level and 21 per cent to tertiary level (UNDP 2009:153). The UNDP report goes on to state that tertiary educated migrants from Eritrea have a much better chance of finding work (under eight per cent are unemployed as opposed to 15 per cent of migrants educated to less than upper secondary level).

In this respect it is instructive to look at the experiences of Eritreans in the UK. Many Eritrean migrants recently arrived in the UK are young and have not completed secondary school; they experience difficulties accessing social services and finding jobs because of their lack of English. Berhane (2009) noted that in Greater Manchester 50 per cent of the demand for interpreting services comes from Eritrean refugees. Hailemariam informally interviewed a number of Eritrean immigrants in Greater Manchester for the purposes of this chapter; many of the

people he interviewed remarked on how proficiency in English (or the lack of it) had affected their employment opportunities. (Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.)

- Tirhas (female): She didn't complete her high school while in Eritrea. She has been in the UK for a year and hasn't yet got any job. Her ESOL lessons haven't helped her much. She still has to depend on interpreters.
- Aster (female): She has been an asylum seeker in the UK for ten years. She has had very little education. She got her refugee status about six months ago. She has all kinds of difficulties because of her very low level of English.
- Lily (female): Works as a cook in a charity. She thinks her English has improved dramatically over the last three years which is why she has been able to get a job at the charity. She says 'proficiency in English or a qualification from the UK can help one get a job not only here in the UK but also elsewhere.'

On the other hand interviews with three Eritrean migrants with a higher initial level of education and corresponding proficiency in English reveal a more encouraging picture (but note the gender divide):

- Wolde (male): has lived in the UK for ten years now. He had completed the first year of university when he left Eritrea. He got a degree from a UK university in Business Management. He now works for a banking management company. He says 'without good English daily life would be difficult and jobs such as the one I have, in a bank would be unthinkable. I had to compete to get this job and needed good English.'
- Tesfay (male): has been in the UK for four years. He got his MA from a UK university. He works as an adviser for a charity that assists refugee communities. He says 'I improved my English in the first years, although I had some proficiency in English before coming to the UK. My job involves talking to refugees from all over the world. I have to attend to their problems and give proper advice in the language they understand. So language plays a very important role in my job.'
- Negusse (male): has lived in the UK for about five years. He works for one of the biggest charities sponsored by the Home Office. He works as a case manager assisting refugees in the early stages of their resettlement. He has completed secondary school. 'English builds one's confidence. It helped me to be confident from the time I was interviewed up to now. I was recruited as a temporary employee but became permanent after a while. Because my job requires speaking good English, it could be because of my English that I was able to maintain my job. My English proficiency was also the main reason for my educational advancement. I have been accepted as a mature student by a university after my interview and English language proficiency assessment.'

One could speculate with some certainty that word gets back to the homeland from people such as these concerning the need for good language skills if they wish to join the diaspora.

Appadurai (1996) extends Anderson's 'imagined community' and places it within the context of global cultural flow: 'an important fact of the world today is that many persons on the globe live in ... imagined "worlds" and not just in imagined communities' (1996:28). According to Appadurai, global flows are mediated through five dimensions; one of these is the 'mediascapes' we have already referred to, i.e. the dissemination of information and images by means of electronic communication, in which 'the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed' (1996:30). Appadurai also proposes the dimensions of 'ethnoscapes' ('the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons'), 'technoscapes' which link people across boundaries of time and space through technology, 'finanscapes' through which money is moved on a global scale and 'ideoscapes' which have to do with the diffusion of ideologies (1996:29-31). These 'scapes' overlap in complex and often disjunctive and unpredictable ways, which 'cannot be any longer understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centres and peripheries)' (1996:28). For us, this makes discussion about the use of English in Africa rather more complex than simply a colonial relic or a necessary means of accessing the knowledge and resources of the West; English appears to be an inevitable conduit for global cultural flow. The fluctuating nature of that English in terms of variety (regional or international, acrolectal or basilectal) is determined by the needs of particular contexts and audiences, rather than being tied or identified with a particular 'centre' variety used by a 'developed' country such as the USA, Australia or the UK. Pennycook, for example, using the example of how hip-hop culture was transmitted in a variety of contexts from Sénégal to Malaysia through the medium of English, talks of the 'translocal' nature of English:

English is a translocal language, a language of fluidity and fixity that moves across, while becoming embedded in, the materiality of localities and social relations.
(Pennycook 2007:6)

Evison and White (2011, forthcoming) also found this to be true in Malaysian 'celebrity culture' in which a variety of Englishes, as well as Bahasa Melayu (Malay), were used by the same individual at different times depending on audience and identity needs. Such a view of English would portray it as more 'neutral' than it is often deemed to be in discussions of its role in Africa, and as a tool for the user to manipulate rather than imposed top-down by government policy, always provided of course that the user has access to and proficiency in English (e.g. Focho 2011, Chapter 7 this volume).

It may also be that in generalising about groups of language users in particular African states, we have neglected to focus on individuals and their motivations for language use. Ricento and Hornberger (1996) and, more recently, Hornberger and Johnson (2007) have gone some way to show the role which individual local educators can play in implementing and influencing macro-level language policies in school contexts, at a much more 'grass roots' level of agency than is usually considered. However, at the most 'grass roots' level possible, the motivation of post-education adult language learners in Eastern Africa does not appear to have received much attention from researchers. In Eritrea, English is not an official

language and proficiency in English does not appear to be crucial for political advancement or employability within the country. However, most people have some degree of competence in English because it has been taught in school and it provides a hope for self-development and progress in an otherwise static situation. These factors suggest that individual motivation to learn languages is an important feature of the Eritrean context and that learning English is a matter of choice rather than imposition.

A *Financial Times* article (Jopson 2009) captures the dissonances caused by the juxtaposition of Appadurai's 'scapes' when small sections of the more affluent (and earlier) diaspora meet home-based Eritreans when returning to Asmara for the summer holidays. The disjunctures occur in all kinds of ways – language use, financial situation, dress and cultural behaviour – even the attitudes to the fruit, which Asmarinos would not be able to associate with mangoes:

On the sun-bleached heights of the Asmara plateau, July is beles season, a few weeks of wild cactus fruit and ostentatious metropolitan chic. It is when the fig cacti, the beles, yield their knobby pellets of fruit to sure-handed children, who pick them to earn their families some cash. July is also when Eritrea's diaspora engine goes into reverse and expat families hustle through Asmara's tiny airport and out on to the tiled streets of the capital, where they parade in the Gucci glamour and hip-hop bling of London and New York. Because their arrival coincides with the ripening of the cactus fruit – and because they have disappeared by the time the fruit is gone – they, too, are dubbed beles by the compatriots they leave behind. The two cross paths on street corners in Asmara, where plastic buckets filled with the pickings from the cactus fields sit at the knees of female traders, swathed like mummies in the white cotton shawls of the Christian highlands. Some diaspora families sweep past, Dad speaking to the kids in Tigrinya, the local language, the kids replying in English or Swedish or Dutch. Others pause to buy handfuls of the fruit, whose yellow skin conceals a fleshy orange core that tastes of mango. (Jopson 2009)

Further on in the article, Jopson speculates on the effect of these disjunctures on the global aspirations of ordinary people (in contrast to the government's more localised stance) and indirectly includes the English language in those aspirations:

[Asmara] is a place where schoolchildren are taught in English from the age of 11, and where their parents can buy satellite dishes to receive CNN and the BBC. So while the regime is turning inwards, the people have embraced globalisation. ... Many Eritreans ... want to move on, and their model is the beles diaspora: driven by betterment, not bitterness; a desire to take advantage of the world, not to prove they don't need it. (Jopson 2009)

As Jopson further remarks, 'the state is not globalising, but the people are'.

English language learners

In an attempt to confirm our hypotheses, stated at the beginning of this chapter, that English learning in Eritrea is undertaken at grass roots level to pursue future aspirations more than current needs, we surveyed 62 adult language learners,

ranging from elementary to advanced level, who were attending evening classes in English at the British Council in Eritrea during the month of October 2010. They received a questionnaire which asked them 1) about their previous experience of learning English, 2) about how they currently used English in their job, 3) about how they thought English would help them in their job in the future and in their personal life, 4) what other languages they felt were important for their work and 5) on a more general level, how they thought English would contribute to the development of Eritrea.

We also interviewed five employers who had sponsored students to study English, asked 22 students to write in greater depth about their reasons for studying English and did follow-up interviews with five students whose responses were particularly interesting in the light of our hypotheses.

Experience of learning English before starting the course and motivation to learn English

All the learners we surveyed, even those at Elementary level, had had previous experience of learning English, even if that experience was often not gained in conventional ways through schooling, which for many had been interrupted by war:

I'm a fighter and while working a full day in a government office, I went to evening school to finish my high school studies ... I also attended a three-month course over a summer.

Most respondents had learnt English at secondary school but wanted to maintain and improve it:

My educational background is, I am 12th grade completed. That means I am able to communicate a little but I have decided to upgrade my knowledge.

We never spoke in English at school.

I don't have self confidence to talk to others.

Some respondents were motivated to join an English course because they were afraid they would lose their proficiency in English:

I was good [at English] when I graduated. After I joined Telecommunications as a telephone technician, I didn't use it, because all my colleagues were Tigrinya speakers. I could make an effort to keep it by reading, listening, speaking outside my job, but I did nothing.

There were more students at the 'elementary' level (17) and 'intermediate' level (34) than at an 'advanced' level (11). Many students had already taken two or more courses at the British Council. When asked whether knowledge of English was more important for operating in the public sphere than other languages, students said that it was more important to know Tigrinya than English. Arabic was also useful, although it was not as important as English. Italian, Tigre and French were also mentioned by a few respondents. The respondents confirmed that Tigrinya plays a major part in working life and that other languages such as English and Arabic play a less central role.

Types of job represented in the survey

It was clear to us that there were beginning to be more students from the private sector who were keen to learn English. The Director of the British Council confirmed that the number of private students as a proportion had been rising over the last two years. This was surprising given the fact that they had to pay for themselves and that private enterprise was economically somewhat depressed. There were roughly 242 students studying English at the British Council in October 2010, of whom 61 were from government agencies and partly sponsored by the government, 29 from foreign institutions and 152 from the private sector. Table 1 gives an idea of the jobs represented in the group of learners who replied to our questionnaire.

<i>Table 1: Jobs performed by students</i>	
Type of job	Numbers
Government jobs Office of the President, Demobilisation Commission, Immigration, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Research and Documentation Centre, Election Commission, International Airport, Eritel (telephone company), radio technician	22
Foreign institutions Norwegian Embassy, Libyan Embassy, American Embassy, British Embassy, British Council	13
Private enterprise Internet cafe, insurance company, shoe shops, doctor of Chinese medicine, graphic designers, video shops, mechanics, restaurant, music and drama organiser	23
No job Unemployed, housewives, students, 'learning for fun'	4

Another surprise was the level of job which learners were currently engaged in. More than half were clerks, receptionists, security guards, gardeners, service assistants, shopkeepers and so forth, working at the lower levels in the management structure of their organisations if they belonged to one. Table 2 gives a snapshot of the level of job performed by those respondents who stated a job title. (We used our personal knowledge of the students and further interviews to draw up this table.)

<i>Table 2: Level of job (arranged roughly in order of responsibility)</i>	
Type of job	Numbers
Gardener/driver/maintenance/security guard	5
Typist/secretarial assistant/clerk/receptionist	9
Running a family shop/cashier	8
Customer service assistant/executive secretary/visa officer/accountant	15
Graphic designer/radio technician/drama organiser/journalist at ministry	4
Doctor (self employed)	1
Middle management in ministry/project co-ordinator/librarian/underwriter	10
Secretary to a minister/management of protocol	4

There did not appear to be a correlation between level of duties and level of English; the Advanced English level included a security guard, a radio technician (who needed English to read books about electronics) and a junior accountant, as well as middle and high ranking government officials. We might of course expect this unpredictable profile, given variations in motivation, differing experiences of learning English at school, amount of contact with English speakers and numerous other factors (such as the higher salary associated with working for a foreign institution, even in a lowly position).

How is English currently used in jobs in Eritrea?

There was a clear difference in the ways in which English was used in the three sectors described in Table 1 (government jobs, foreign institutions, private enterprise). Most of the responses to the question ‘What do you use English for in your job?’ which were provided by people working in the government sector focused on reading and writing in English (with the exception of customs and immigration officials, and some senior staff). Those working for foreign institutions and private enterprise tended to mention oral communication with foreigners. The verb ‘communicate’ occurred much more frequently with the last two groups. See Table 3.

Type of job	Comments
Government jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘we write a lot about legal issues in English’ ‘to understand manuals and use computers effectively’ ‘to read and write letters’ ‘writing proposals’ ‘writing reports, doing research’ ‘attending workshops and seminars’ ‘to communicate with foreigners whom I meet in my job and abroad’ ‘I don’t actually use English in my job but I use it in my parent’s shop’
Foreign institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘listening for my work orders’ ‘communicating with my supervisor’ ‘I use it for oral communications with my boss, emails, and to transfer information and messages’ ‘communicating with my neighbours’
Private enterprise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‘to help my children’ ‘to sell goods to foreigners who do not talk Tigrinya’ ‘to communicate with reinsurers and foreign investors’ ‘communicating with my patients’ ‘communicating with our customers, letters, phone calls’ ‘understanding letters, writing replies’

The ‘helping my children’ comment referred to a wish to help them with their school work and was mentioned several times by the ‘private enterprise’ group.

We were interested in the response of a video shop manager who said that he needed English 'for writing words on the video cassettes' and we interviewed him further. It appeared that he made wedding movies and added the English words as subtitles because they were fashionable, could be used to add the words of English songs, and were also useful for communication if the video was sent to family members who lived in the diaspora. Stationery shop owners also told us that greetings cards in English sold much better than those in Tigrinya. This shows, as did the example of the wedding video, that English is being used as a commodity (as is French) to enhance the attractiveness and saleability of goods, by association with global culture.

The symbolic use of English in selling goods, through advertisements, promotional posters, shop signs and so on, in order to represent certain values such as modernity and fashionableness, has been studied in Asian contexts (e.g. Krishnaswamy 2007) but has been somewhat ignored in African contexts; and yet it is clearly part of economic development.

It was also clear that government offices were paying serious attention to customer service in their selection of who should benefit from English classes. Employees who had close contact with foreigners (e.g. in customs and immigration) were chosen, as well as those who might benefit from distance education with foreign universities and those who might participate in workshops and short-term training.

One group of students represented in our survey had taken a one-off course in strategic communication run by the UK Centre for Political and Diplomatic Studies and organised by the British Council Eritrea. This course was aimed at the middle and upper management in ministries, and its *raison d'être* was to prepare them for representing the government effectively at home and abroad and providing 'professional training in international relations, diplomatic practice, policy and political work, negotiation, management, media and language skills' (www.cpd.s.co.uk).

There was an interesting group (five students) who said that they either did not have a job or did not use English in their job. Four of these had plans to study, for example:

I am going to join a college, and since I have been away from education, I believe I need to improve and polish my English.

One respondent said that he did not use English in his job 'until now' and stated 'I am just learning for fun'.

How respondents felt English had improved their working and personal lives

There appeared to be a mismatch between how respondents felt that English had improved their work and their personal lives. Of the 49 students who had taken at least one course (13 had only just begun learning English at the British Council), only just over half the students (29) reported that it had helped them get promoted, although many stated that it had helped them communicate better with foreigners, improved their language proficiency and given them more confidence. However,

42 out of 49 respondents said that it had improved their lives outside work. This supports our theory that students perceive English to be useful for private and individual fulfilment and future goals rather than immediate instrumental objectives in their present job.

Perceived importance of English to their own future development and that of Eritrea

It is interesting to attempt to relate the comments made by our respondents on their personal development and that of the country to the roles of English in development mentioned by Coleman (2010). He suggests the following possible roles: 1) increasing employability, 2) enabling international co-operation and collaboration, 3) providing access to research and information, 4) facilitating international mobility, 5) facilitating disaster relief and 6) acting as a neutral language in contexts where there is a potential for conflict. When asked about how they thought improved proficiency in English would help them in their work life, most people said it would help them communicate with foreigners orally or in written form, or it would help them to take part in international conferences and workshops, or it would help them study (points 2 and 3 above).

However, when asked how they thought learning English would improve their personal life in the future (as opposed to their work life), some interesting motivations were revealed. Mobility (Coleman’s point 4) was a major factor: ‘It will help me when I go abroad’ and ‘I may go abroad’. English was also seen as improving one’s ability to talk to others: ‘It will help me to socialise easily’. There was, too, a sense of personal development: ‘I can improve myself’, ‘I can upgrade my education’ and ‘I enjoy the learning process’. Furthermore there was an often mentioned desire to help the next generation: ‘I can help my children’. Such personal views on self development may sometimes be missing from the bigger picture of a country’s development (except in studies such as that by Focho 2011).

Role of English	Views of respondents
Employability	‘To improve the work skills’
Collaboration	‘Experts from all fields can share experiences and projects in English’ ‘Building partnerships at bilateral and international levels’
Access to information	‘Most courses for development are given in English’ ‘Easy access to international resources in the areas of science, medicine’ ‘Most of our curriculum is based on English’ ‘To cope with science and technology’ ‘Books, the internet are all in the English language’ ‘Every Eritrean must advertise his source of tourism’
Mobility	No comments
Disaster relief	No comments
Neutrality	No comments

Respondents were also asked how they thought English would help Eritrea to develop. All 62 respondents felt that English was important to the future development of Eritrea. Their replies covered some but not all of the roles of English mentioned above. The categories which were not mentioned are significant in terms of Eritrea's desire to be independent of outside aid agencies and its present, somewhat isolated, political stance. Mobility was mentioned on a personal development level but not on a national level. By far the largest number of responses were in the 'access to information' category, as can be seen in Table 4.

Perhaps the perceived linguistic 'neutrality' of English is not necessary in a country which encourages local languages and has two lingua francas, Tigrinya and Arabic. It may be also that the term 'international' has connotations of neutrality. Fifty out of 62 respondents wrote some variant on the 'English is an international language therefore it is important for development' mantra without really giving any concrete examples. It seems to be an accepted truism without much reflection of its implications.

One respondent even said 'Well, English is an international language, so it is important. But to be frank, I don't know how.' If people did elaborate, it seemed to be in terms of lessening isolation and enabling communication with the rest of the world:

- English language is an international language and Eritrea is part of the world, and it's important for her development.
- If the people of Eritrea can be understood by the world, it can help the development of the economy.
- English is very important for the country to develop and go global.
- It can help us communicate with the world.
- Eritrea as part of the world community should use English.
- Eritrea will be able to communicate with other parts of the world.

These comments seem to us to represent the point of view of those who are somewhat isolated from the world community to which they allude.

By way of concluding our discussion and sorting through perspectives it is useful to consider what our findings illustrate about the most recent discourses on globalisation and cultural flows and also how they focus on individual agency as a counterpoint to that large picture. The 'linguistic imperialism' paradigm equated the spread of English with the homogenisation of world culture through English (Phillipson 1992). More recent views by, for example, Pennycook (2010) would suggest that ultimately globalisation does not have a homogenising effect; rather it creates a mixture of multiple world cultures in which a large number of languages and language varieties are involved:

To suggest that globalisation is only a process of US or Western domination of the world is to take a narrow and ultimately unproductive view of global relations. Likewise, to view culture and language in terms only of reflections of economic development – as with views that relate language and culture too intimately with

nationhood – is to miss the point that new technologies and communications are enabling immense and complex flows of people, signs, sounds and images across multiple borders in multiple directions. (Pennycook 2010:65)

We believe that Eritreans living in Asmara do perceive that, for them, English is an important way of being part of that globalisation process and of lessening their isolation, but this does not mean that they do not value the role which other languages can play in their lives. As well as the global view, too often when discussing the role of English in development, the smaller picture of personal decisions and choice is forgotten: ‘What is lacking in this [global] perspective is an account of the agency of the individual’ (McKay 2010:94). So while this study cannot claim to be more than a snapshot of the aspirations of a fairly small group of individual English language learners in the capital of Eritrea, Asmara, at a particular point in time, we hope that it has offered a view of how grass roots language values and perceptions of what the English language can do for personal development can shape individual agency in this small city in the Horn of Africa. We believe that the personal decisions to improve English proficiency by taking classes show the ‘expansion of many individual horizons of hope and fantasy’ (our italics), in this case through the medium of English language learning, which Appadurai mentions as one of the positive aspects of global cultural flows (1996:47).

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