

English for economic development: a case study of migrant workers from Bangladesh

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Contents

The writers

Acknowledgements

Abstract

1 Introduction	7
2 English and economic gain	8
2.1 The value of English in South Asia.....	8
3 Bangladesh and economic migration	9
3.1 Bangladesh.....	9
3.2 Migration from Bangladesh.....	9
3.3 Remittances to Bangladesh from the Middle East.....	10
3.4 Context of the research: Kharrah Village, Sreenagar Upazila, Munshiganj District, Dhaka Division.....	10
4 Methodology	11
4.1 Sampling and interviewing.....	11
4.2 Ethical issues.....	11
4.3 Data collection.....	12
4.4 Data analysis.....	12
5 A socio-economic profile of the participants	13
5.1 Education.....	14
5.2 Language skills.....	15
5.3 Skills training.....	15
5.4 Employment pre-migration.....	15
5.5 Employment during migration.....	15
5.6 Countries worked in.....	16
5.7 Time spent abroad.....	16
5.8 Employment post-migration.....	16
6 Findings	17
6.1 Language resources in migration.....	17
6.1.1 English as a lingua franca.....	17
6.1.2 Knowledge of local languages.....	18
6.2 Economic benefits and costs of migration.....	19
6.2.1 Factors contributing to economic success.....	20
6.2.2 The role of skills.....	21
6.2.3 Language skills.....	21
6.2.4 Other factors which influence economic outcomes of migration.....	22
6.3 Cultural challenges and intercultural awareness.....	22
6.3.1 Culture shock.....	23
6.3.2 Intercultural communication.....	24
6.3.3 Status.....	25
7 Conclusion	27
8 Implications and recommendations	29
References	31

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When we started our work with these participants, we were not prepared for the sense of injustice and frustration that we would face when confronted with the histories and life stories of migrant workers from Bangladesh. Throughout the project we felt a need to increase awareness of their plight and to think of ways to minimise it. It is for that reason that we sought extra resource to produce a video about the experiences of migrant workers, and to attempt to seek even more funding to create a set of accessible and contextually appropriate educational resources for them. Our thanks again go to British Council and the OU for providing extra funding, and to Clare Woodward of the OU (along with Mike and Qumrul) and Mike Peet, of Peet Media Associates, for volunteering time and energy to produce this video, which can be viewed here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ho6gW5NqtG0&feature=youtu.be. Finally, to find out more about the plight of migrant workers in the Middle East and encourage social action to address human rights abuses, please go to **www.migrant-rights.org**

Abstract

This project investigates the relationship between English language learning and economic development by looking at the case of workers from rural Bangladesh who emigrated to the Middle East and Southeast Asia in search of employment. In a previous study of attitudes to English language learning in rural communities in Bangladesh, funded by the British Council (Erling et al, 2012), one of the primary reasons people gave for wanting to learn English was that it would assist them in pursuing this type of economic migration, and would thus help with providing a better life for both the migrant and his or her family back home. This report presents a follow-up qualitative study investigating the experiences and reflections of migrant workers who have worked abroad but are now returned, either permanently or temporarily, to Bangladesh. The research provides first-hand accounts of the role of English as a language for international development in the context of economic globalisation and migration. In doing this, it identifies the language and other needs of those living and working in contexts of this sort, and provides valuable insights which can feed into the design and implementation of English language education policies and programmes.

1

Introduction

English language teaching projects in development contexts are often underpinned by a perceived relationship between English language ability and economic development. One national context in which the relationship between English and economic gain has been a prime motivator for international development initiatives is Bangladesh. For example, the large UK Government-funded ‘English in Action’ project, which is running in Bangladesh from 2008–2017, states that it aims ‘to contribute to the economic growth of Bangladesh by providing English language as a tool for better access to the world economy’ (EIA, 2010). Given the importance of understanding the cultural and social contextual factors which have an effect on the extent to which English can indeed provide economic development (and thus fulfil the desired aims of projects such as English in Action), the research project reported on here examines the circumstances in which people from Bangladeshi rural communities use or desire to use English as part of the global job market. It does this by focusing on a particular category of worker from Bangladeshi society: those from communities where there are few local employment opportunities, who emigrate abroad in search of work, particularly to the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In previous research (Erling et al, 2012), one of the oft-cited reasons that people from rural Bangladesh gave for wanting to learn English was that it would provide the tools for pursuing this sort of economic migration, and in this way ensure a better life for both them and their families back home.

Coleman (2010) notes the need for further studies in poorer economies and suggests that such research requires a ‘fine grained approach’, looking at particular sectors of activity, for example migrant working. He reports on research conducted by Chiswick and Miller (1995) which argues for better language teaching for members of the population who may pursue work abroad, as this increases the likelihood of a smoother transition and a higher income for migrants. However, he laments the fact that ‘the role of English in international migrant working has received relatively very little attention’ (Coleman, 2010: 10). The current research attempts to fill this gap by exploring the perceptions and experiences of migrant workers who have left to work abroad, but have now returned to Bangladesh, either temporarily or permanently. It explores the types of linguistic resources they found important, the role that English played in their experience, and the extent to which they relate skills in English with economic gain.

2

English and economic gain

The relationship between English and economic gain has been the focus of theorising for a number of scholars in recent decades. A key notion underpinning much of this work is Bourdieu's concept of 'linguistic capital' (1991), and the suggestion that linguistic resources are differentially distributed amongst members of society, and that possession of certain of these resources gives access to improved social opportunities which can, ultimately, be transferred into economic capital. Given the status that English has in the modern world as the preeminent international language, it is seen as having a high value, both in social terms and in the opportunities it can provide for economic advancement. According to Euromonitor research, for example, there is a strong perception across developing economies that knowledge of English can aid personal economic growth and provide better career prospects, thus offering the chance for people to escape poverty (Pinon and Haydon, 2010). In many contexts, therefore, improving English skills is viewed as an important means of advancing both individual wealth and the economy of a country (see Erling and Seargeant, 2013). Research conducted in Bangladesh as part of the English in Action project substantiates this, with over 80 per cent of the population surveyed believing that knowledge of English will help them increase their income (EIA, 2009; Erling et al, 2013: 97).

2.1 The value of English in South Asia

With this general perception in mind, recent research has attempted to investigate the relationship between English and economic value from a quantitative point of view in a number of different national contexts, including those of South Asia. Studies investigating the issue have shown that, while there may be some form of causal relationship between English ability and economic development, the pre-existing social environment, along with personal circumstances, complexify this (Erling, 2014).

Studies such as Azam et al (2010) and Aslam et al (2010) give further insight into the economic value that can accrue from knowledge of English among the general population, and particularly in the case of those from rural areas. Azam et al (2010) used the India Human Development Survey of 2005 to quantify the effects of English-speaking ability on wages. Their findings show that being fluent in English (compared to not speaking the language at all) increased the hourly wages of men by 34 per cent, and thus had a

similar economic impact on wages as completing secondary school had, and had half as much impact as completing a Bachelor's degree. Simply being able to speak a small amount of English increased male hourly wages by 13 per cent. More experienced and more educated workers received higher returns to English. Returns to English were lower for women, particularly those in rural areas, and were also significantly lower for members of India's Schedule Caste, the historically disadvantaged grouping in Indian society. They thus conclude that:

Upward mobility does not come automatically with English skills in India; some obstacles, which likely include long-rooted discrimination against low caste, impede low caste group members even when they have a skill that is valued by the modern labour market (Azam et al, 2010: 18).

A similarly complex picture was found in India and Pakistan by Aslam et al (2010), who report that English language skills are highly rewarded in both countries, although differently among men and women and for people in urban and rural areas. Reflecting on the results of their study, the authors question whether the returns to English reflect returns to quality of education and/or the high returns of tertiary education (Aslam et al, 2010: 23). They state that this is likely to be the case as, unlike the literacy and numeracy skills they measured, which are acquired at basic levels of education, English language skills are acquired at higher levels of schooling. Similarly, those with better English language skills are more likely to have experienced a higher quality of education. Just as high levels of English seem to be a sign of high levels of education therefore, low proficiency in English seems to be a sign of poor educational quality. This hints towards what others have mentioned as 'a fuzzy boundary between being educated and knowing English' (Shamim, 2011: 301).

Taken as a whole, results of recent work looking at the relation between English language and economic gain in development contexts indicate that any such study needs to consider a wide range of contextual factors which influence the causal nature of the relationship. The contextual factors that might have an impact on the value of English for the participants in the present study are explored in the following section.

3

Bangladesh and economic migration

3.1 Bangladesh

Bangladesh, with a population of over 150 million, is the world's eighth most populous country. Although the country has made progress in recent decades in reducing poverty and malnutrition, this still remains a chronic problem, with over 30 per cent of the people living below the poverty line. The per capita national income of US\$958 as of 2013 (World Bank, 2014) is one of the lowest for South Asian nations. Despite a number of deep-rooted challenges (including political instability, poor infrastructure, and significant negative effects of global warming) Bangladesh's economy has, however, grown by around six per cent a year in recent years, much of this generated by the service sector, and the garment industry in particular. Nevertheless it is estimated that, in 2013, 13 per cent of GDP came from remittances from overseas labour.

3.2 Migration from Bangladesh

The official government statistics show that from 1976 to 2014, the country sent more than nine million workers abroad (BMET, 2014a), although, since many migrant workers travel through unofficial channels, this figure is likely to be much higher in actuality. During this period, labour migration has become a vital element of the Bangladeshi economy and is increasingly important for the survival of many households in the country. As Kazmin says, these types of earnings offer 'a lifeline for millions of impoverished families' in Bangladesh today (2009, in Ahmed, 2011: 81). Although it is clearly the case that recent geo-political events, such as the economic downturn of 2008 and the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' revolutions in the Middle East, have had an impact on migration from Bangladesh, with an estimated 35,000 Bangladeshis repatriated from Libya alone (International Organization for Migration, 2015), it is not yet possible to obtain figures that show how deep this impact has been, and it seems likely that the demise of the North African destinations as a place for employment migration will simply have been replaced by the continuing markets in the Middle East.

Long-term migration to industrialised countries has been a Bangladeshi migration trend for decades, and by far the greatest number of migrants are temporary migrants to the Middle East (ME) or Southeast Asia. It is, therefore, temporary migrants

to the ME that are the focus of this study, as these make up about 75 per cent of the migrant population (Rahman, 2012). Major destinations include Saudi Arabia (which hosts about 40 per cent of the migrant workers from Bangladesh), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and Libya (Mamun and Nath, 2010: 32).

Bangladeshi migration to the ME started in the 1970s, when economic prosperity in the Gulf Region was growing due to the discovery of natural resources in the area along with the rise in global oil prices. This created a large demand for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in a variety of sectors (Mamun and Nath, 2010: 29). In 2006–08 there was a further substantial increase in demand for such workers, triggered by the economic boom that followed from increases in oil revenue.

Migration to the ME has mainly been characterised by short-term employment for specific job contracts, with migrants then returning home after completion of the contract period (Mamun and Nath, 2010: 31). These temporary migrants tend to earn less than permanent migrants, but also to send more remittances back to their families in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2011: 81; Arun and Ulku, 2011: 910). According to Rahman (2012: 220), approximately 34 per cent of migrants were living in the ME for one to two years, 22 per cent for three to five years, and 23 per cent for six to ten years. Remarkably, nearly 20 per cent had been working abroad for a period of 11 years or more. Generally speaking, temporary migrants to the ME do not integrate into local society, nor is there much expectation that they should: they are not granted the same social and economic rights as local citizens; they are not allowed to marry or be involved in sexual relationships with locals; and once their visas expire, they are required to return to their home country (Rahman, 2012).

Female migrants from Bangladesh began entering the global labour market in the 1980s, although there has been at times a partial or complete ban on the migration of unskilled or semi-skilled women under the age of 35 due to the likelihood that they face abuse (Moses, 2009; Siddiqui, 2001; 2005). Because of this, Bangladeshi women accounted for less than three per cent of the official number of migrant workers in 2010 (Bélanger and Rahman, 2013). Survey data suggests, however, that this number is

increasing and in 2014 the official number of female migrant workers had risen to 54,000 (from 11,000 in 2004) (BMET, 2014b). Moreover, because of the restriction on women migrants, there is likely to be a high number of women who go through unofficial channels (Farid et al, 2009: 389).

3.3 Remittances to Bangladesh from the Middle East

The flow of unskilled (or less skilled) workers from Bangladesh to more developed countries in the ME has resulted in large sums of money being sent back to the home country. By 2008, Bangladesh had become one of the top ten remittance-recipient countries in the world (Paul and Das, 2011: 42). Recorded remittance transfers to Bangladesh reached a level of over US\$10 billion in 2009 – a significant share of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (ca. ten per cent) (Jha et al, 2010: 65). Remittance inflows also dwarf Official Development Assistance (ODA) as well as Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows (Zaman and Akbar, 2013: 110). While the global financial crisis has meant that remittance flows have slowed somewhat, this is much more muted than that of other foreign currency flows (Jha et al, 2010: 78).

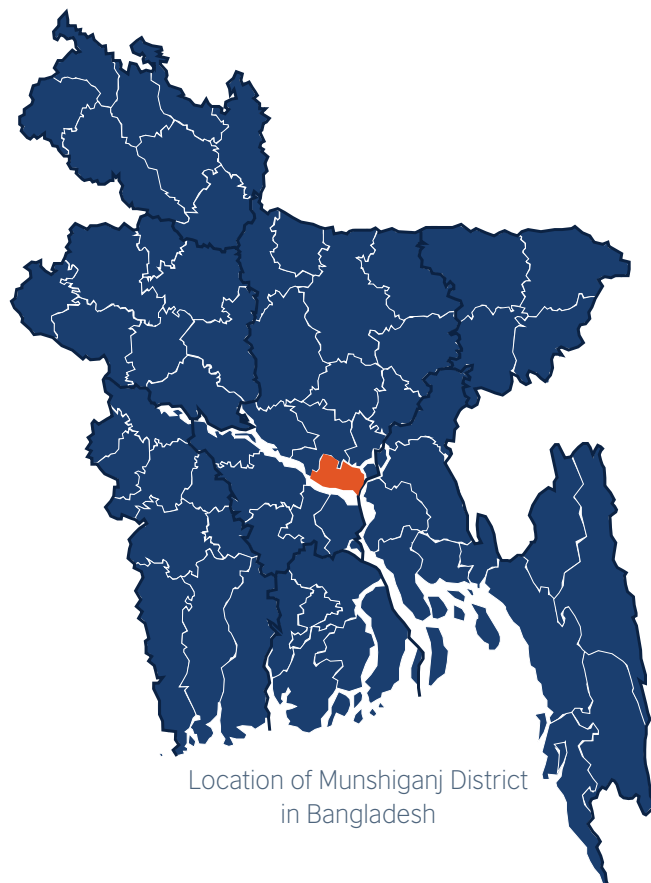
3.4 Context of the research: Kharrah Village (Sreenagar Upazila, Munshiganj District, Dhaka Division)

Migration for work is common across all seven divisions of Bangladesh, particularly from the districts of Sylhet, Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla and Dhaka (Mamun and Nath, 2010: 34). The Dhaka and Chittagong divisions alone account for 78.2 per cent and the majority of female migrants come from the Dhaka division. The research for this project was carried out in Kharrah Village.

Kharrah has a long history of migration with most homes having family members who are working, or have worked in the Middle East (or, less commonly, the Far East). The village is in Sreenagar Upazila (an upazila being the name for an area of local administration), which forms part of the Munshiganj district of Bangladesh in the Dhaka Division. Kharrah is about 30 miles south of the capital city of Dhaka; however, as distance and travel time do not easily correlate in Bangladesh, the journey from central Dhaka can easily take three or more hours by road. Farming is the main profession and industry in this district with very little large scale alternative employment.

The village strikes an observer as relatively affluent by Bangladeshi standards, with most houses having tiled (as opposed to corrugated) roofs, and being built of brick. There is also evidence of construction – generally improvements to individual homes (for

example, the adding of a new floor). All of this is an indicator of a flow of foreign income. As locals were keen to point out however, the fact that this wealth is dependent on foreign sources could have a negative effect in terms of the national government excluding the village from various welfare and infrastructure grants.



Location of Munshiganj District in Bangladesh



Map of Sreenagar Upazila

4

Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of the language needs and experiences of migrant workers from rural Bangladesh, this study employed an ethnographically-based methodology, surveying a cross-section of a rural community. The research explores the following research questions:

- What are the language and communication needs that people have when they are pursuing or forced to pursue employment abroad? How does their previous language provision prepare them for this?
- What are migrants' perceptions of the relationship between their level of English language ability and economic gain? How has their relative knowledge of English affected their experience of migration?

4.1 Sampling and interviewing

Gaining access to a migrant community was a major issue in carrying out research. The Bangladeshi research team was based in Dhaka and, although they were familiar with issues of migration in Bangladesh, they did not have personal connections to the migrant community. The decision to set the research in the village of Kharrah stemmed from the fact that the father-in-law of one of the researchers was from there. Through him, the researchers had a personal connection and a link to the community.

The process of contacting participants for this study was based on the idea of 'snowball sampling' (although the metaphor of 'mud ball sampling' might be more appropriate in Bangladesh). In this technique, existing participants recruit future participants from among their acquaintances. Thus the sample group appears to grow like a rolling snow ball, or mud ball. The researchers contacted participants by collecting their names and contact information from other participants. In some cases, when the researchers showed up for an interview, participants were accompanied by other ex-migrant workers who were friends or relatives of the participant they had contacted. In such cases, the researchers conducted a group interview.

The data were collected by two Bangladeshi researchers – both co-authors of this report. As some participants had returned to Bangladesh some time ago, the researchers started the interview by discussing with participants some photos of typical scenes of migrant workers in the Middle East in order to set the scene and spark participants' memories. For the interviews, the researchers had a list of possible questions, which they used as a guide, but which was flexible enough to accommodate situations where participants wanted to elaborate on certain topics, brought up issues out of sequence, or if certain topics were deemed not to be relevant.

The interview followed a thematic flow, beginning with general questions about the participant's education (including languages spoken) and what they had wanted to do upon leaving school. This led to a second strand of questions relating to their decision to migrate (and the possible influence and advice given by family and other members of the community who had previously worked overseas), as well as investigating the main challenges they had in the processes required for migration. The third strand included questions about the participants' experiences while working overseas, eliciting information on the jobs held, their economic opportunities and, crucially, the skills needed for the jobs they were involved in for gaining promotion or higher salaries. Languages were specifically focused on (if not voluntarily raised) in this section, with a further focus on the kind of language skills needed and if and how language skills improved while overseas. The final theme was around experiences and reflections since returning from Bangladesh, and if the experience of migration had been financially (or otherwise) beneficial.

4.2 Ethical issues

This research was undertaken within a structured framework which includes assessment by the Open University Human Participants and Material Ethics Committee (HPMEC)¹. We also followed the British Association for Applied Linguistics Recommendations for Good Practice in Applied Linguistics². All research participants in this study, including local guides, have been anonymised, and pseudonyms are used to refer to them.

4.3 Data collection

The data collection took place in three stages: the pilot stage, the main visit, and the follow-up visit. The pilot study was conducted in September 2013 in order to test the instrument and method of collecting data, as well as allowing one of the UK-based researchers to visit the research site. The guide to the community suggested an interview with someone, who then brought four of his acquaintances who had also been migrant workers. These five participants then identified four further people who could be interviewed during the next phase of research.

The main data collection was organised soon after the pilot (November 2013). Some of the participants were interviewed in groups and some of the participants were individually interviewed, depending on the relationship and rapport between the participants, but also by their availability. A follow-up visit was undertaken in June 2014 in order to fill in gaps in information about some of the participants' experiences or our understandings of their experiences, and to recruit a few more female participants. All the interviews which were conducted in this study took place in Bangla and were audio-recorded. The interview data were transcribed and translated by the Bangladeshi researchers involved in the project.

4.4 Data analysis

In collecting data for this study we used participants' autobiographic narratives and reflections as a means of gaining insight into their personal migration histories and the role of language in this (Pavlenko, 2007, 2008; Piller and Takahashi, 2010). These narratives are treated as 'accounts' of truths, of the attitudes, beliefs, and mental states of participants, rather than as factual reports (Talmy, 2010: 132).

In a first stage of the analysis, profiles were constructed providing a summary of the biographies of the participants. Their narratives were then coded according to re-occurring themes. These included: education and skills, language learning and use, intercultural communication, economic benefits and status. A discourse analysis of the accounts gave insights both into the participants' experiences, their perceived needs and attitudes to the issues the research was focusing upon, and broader ideological patterns relating to the positioning of different languages within society.

¹ These documents are available on the OU's Research website: www.open.ac.uk/research/main

² www.baal.org.uk/dox/goodpractice_full.pdf

5

A socio-economic profile of the participants

In order to ascertain how typical the profile of the migrants in this study are, compared to most migrants from Bangladesh, we looked at the profile of migrants from Bangladesh more generally.

Bangladeshi migrants to the ME are mostly men (around 98 per cent); in this study, 23 of the 27 interviewed (or 85 per cent) were men. A survey of migrant households conducted in 2009 found that three quarters of migrants were in their 20s and 30s, with an average age of 32. The participants in the current study ranged in age from 25–62, with a median age of 44. Our participants were, on average, slightly older than the average therefore, perhaps because of this study’s focus on return migrants.

Previous research has shown that around 63 per cent of migrant workers are married with their wives living in Bangladesh. Of the married migrants, 87 per cent had children (Rahman, 2012: 219). While there are exceptions, the majority of the participants in this

sample have families in Bangladesh; those who do not often mentioned that they support the families of siblings.

In this study, we made a concerted attempt to include women in the sample. There are four women participants (or 15 per cent of this sample), and while this is a small number, they are perhaps over-represented given the small percentage of female migrants that are officially recorded. Previous research has shown that the majority of female migrant workers are (or have been) married. Many are divorced or widowed, which can enhance their feelings of responsibility to support their families, but also increases their freedom to make decisions for themselves (Afsar, 2009: 7). In this study, at least two of the women reported that their husbands had left them, without financial support, so they went to work abroad as one of the only options to support their children.

Table 1: Profile of the participants

	Name	Gender	Age	Countries where migrated	Occupation in the emigrated countries	Duration of stay
1	Afia	Female	42	Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon	Domestic worker	20 years
2	Badol	Male	26	UAE	Construction labourer, electrician	3 years
3	Bashar	Male	42	Oman	Family cook and driver	23 years
4	Bilkis	Female	48	UAE, Saudi Arabia	Domestic worker	18 years
5	Bulbul	Male	55	Saudi Arabia, Singapore, UAE	Farmer, pipeline labourer, assistant cook	21 years
6	Faheem	Male	57	Saudi Arabia, Libya, UK	Pesticide worker	24 years
7	Ferdousi	Female	58	Kuwait	Domestic worker	10 years
8	Gofur*	Male	58	Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia	Driver, gardener	18 years
9	Hafez	Male	38	Saudi Arabia	Imam and store keeper	2.5 years
10	Hakim	Male	35	UAE, Saudi Arabia	Waiter, cleaner, farmer	9.3 years

11	Hasibul	Male	48	Saudi Arabia	Cleaner, shop keeper	6 years
12	Imran	Male	36	Saudi Arabia	Refrigeration mechanic	10 years
13	Jahid	Male	42	UAE	Domestic worker, guard	5 years
14	Jamil	Male	35	Singapore	Construction worker, painter	2.5 years
15	Kaisar	Male	48	Saudi Arabia	Driver, cleaner	7 years
16	Kalam	Male	50	Saudi Arabia	Hospital labourer, cook	7 years
17	Liton	Male	48	South Korea, Saudi Arabia	Catering, pipeline labourer	6 years
18	Monjurul	Male	55	Saudi Arabia	Catering	9.5 years
19	Piash	Male	33	South Korea	Motor mechanic, textile worker	13 years
20	Pijush	Male	59	Singapore	Construction, painter	12.5 years
21	Quader	Male	38	Saudi Arabia	Juice maker	3 years
22	Rahat	Male	33	Singapore, Saudi Arabia	Security guard, lift operator, automobile mechanic	15 years
23	Razzak	Male	25	Malaysia, UAE	Food processing labourer, construction	2.5 years
24	Rina	Female	46	Bahrain	Domestic worker	3.5 years
25	Shawkat	Male	62	Saudi Arabia	Electric worker, builder	8 years
26	Shihab	Male	42	Singapore, Saudi Arabia	Pipeline labourer, welder	10 years
27	Sobhan	Male	37	Kuwait, Saudi Arabia	Grocery shop worker	10 years

5.1 Education

According to previous research, migrant workers are primarily from poor families with little or no education. It has been found that approximately 30 per cent of migrants completed only one to five years of schooling and 50 per cent finished six to ten years of schooling. Of the remaining 20 per cent, half had no formal schooling, while the other half had finished higher secondary and other vocational training courses (Rahman, 2012: 219).

The educational qualifications of the participants in this study were similarly quite low: four of the participants had no formal education (15 per cent),

and four (15 per cent) were only educated to primary school level. Secondary education was by far the most common education level of the overall respondent sample, with 56 per cent being educated to this level (but only 25 per cent of the women). Just four respondents were educated to a higher level than this (undergraduate degree level). Women were much less educated than the men: two out of four women had no formal education whatsoever, while only two of the 23 men interviewed had no formal education. Those with little experience of formal education tended to have very weak literacy skills in Bangla, with some mentioning that they were only able to write their names.

The lack of educational success in Bangladesh was, in most cases, a contributing factor to these participants' decisions to migrate. Some participants' lower scores on exams blocked them from carrying on with further education. For others, their low socioeconomic status meant that they could not take up cost-bearing opportunities for education. Many of them reported family tragedies as the impetus for seeking work abroad, e.g. the death of their father, or being left by their husband. For most of the women their low levels of education meant that they could not access jobs in Bangladesh as there are very few (acceptable) opportunities for low-skilled employment for women.

5.2 Language skills

The participants had a range of language skills. In the pilot, the researchers found that the participants had reasonable proficiency in English for their educational background, and reported that this was a result of their overseas work experience. 15 of the participants (56 per cent) said that they had learned some English before migration, which is unsurprising since it has been required in the school curriculum from Class one since 1990. But only ten of them (37 per cent) reported that they had learned English at school.

Nine of the participants (33 per cent) reported knowing Arabic before they migrated. Again, this is not surprising since many Bangladeshis learn some Arabic as part of their religious education. A third of the participants (nine) did not have any knowledge of foreign languages before they migrated from Bangladesh. In most cases, the participants referred to spoken language skills, although a few participants with higher levels of education also reported reading and writing abilities in English.

Table 2: Foreign language knowledge pre-migration

Language	(n=27)
English	15 (56 per cent)
Arabic	9 (33 per cent)
Korean	1 (three per cent)
None	9 (33 per cent)

5.3 Skills training

Previous research has shown that the majority of migrant workers from Bangladesh are semi-skilled and less-skilled workers (nearly 70 per cent of the five million Bangladeshis who migrated from 2000–

2011). In this study, eight of the 27 participants (30 per cent) reported that they did not have any skills training before working abroad. Four of them said that they had some training before they left, while another ten received some training while in country (37 per cent). The types of pre-departure training mentioned include air-conditioning mechanic training, welding, metal formation and refrigeration; however, for many of them this training was not relevant for the type of work they were engaged in abroad. The types of training received abroad included driving, computers, automobile repair, cooking, and health and safety. None of the women had received any skills training.

5.4 Employment pre-migration

The majority of the participants (at least 18, or 67 per cent) had some experience of work in Bangladesh before working abroad. They worked as farmers, electricians or machine workers, as an imam, or in the garment industry. In many cases, incomes were low or unstable; those in agriculture reported not having a stable output of crops. For many, however, working abroad was their first experience of official employment. Many of them came directly from school, college or vocational training; others had spent time trying to find work in Dhaka, or as day labourers. None of the women in the sample had been engaged in official employment before working abroad, although they all contributed to the household labour, for example by taking care of the cattle, cutting grass for the cattle, doing household chores and helping parents.

5.5 Employment during migration

The participants were engaged in a range of employment opportunities, the most common of which are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Occupation abroad

Occupation	(n=33)
Domestic worker	7
Shopkeeper	5
Catering	4
Mechanic	4
Security	4
Driver	3
Construction	3
Pipeline worker	3

The number of occupations is greater than 27 because several of the participants switched their

jobs during their time abroad. Six of the participants (22 per cent) only held one job during their experience abroad. Eight of them had two jobs (30 per cent). Ten of them had three jobs (37 per cent), while three (11 per cent) had four or more jobs.

5.6 Countries worked in

The majority of participants in this study (63 per cent) worked in Saudi Arabia; another seven (26 per cent) worked in the UAE. Other destinations included Kuwait (four), Oman (two), Bahrain (one), Lebanon (one), Qatar (one), Iraq (one) and Libya (one). While these destinations were not a focus of our research, others worked in Singapore (five), South Korea (two), Malaysia (one) and the UK (one), along with a country in the Middle East. Ten of the participants worked in two or more countries, with one of them working in seven different countries.

5.7 Time spent abroad

The participants spent anywhere from 2.5 years to 24 years working abroad. The median time that they spent working abroad was 10.8 years. Seven of the participants returned home and then went to work abroad again.

5.8 Employment post-migration

Many of the participants had returned to Bangladesh and are no longer working abroad. Four reported that they are now running their own businesses in Bangladesh. Three are involved in agriculture. Other jobs mentioned are selling land, firewood, or visas, working in a shop, or doing unpaid community work.

Eleven of the respondents report that they are unemployed – either out of choice or because they have not found appropriate work. Some were looking for new opportunities and were even open to the idea of working abroad again. The three women who had returned to Bangladesh were all unemployed, and the cultural context prevents them from considering wage-earning options in Bangladesh.

Two participants reported that they are officially retired and no longer looking for work. Some seemed to have saved enough through migration – or accrued enough wealth through their investments enabled by migration – to finance their retirement. There was a common theme in many returnees' narratives that they had worked enough for a life time and had earned a break – or the opportunity to be supported by others. In many cases, other family members had gone abroad to work and were sending money back to support the family.

6

Findings

6.1 Language resources in migration

The stepping off point for the research is the question of what type of language resources – and particularly English language resources – were important for migrant workers from Bangladesh, and the potential relationship between English language skills and economic development.

Knowledge of languages plays a role in all aspects of migration, from recruitment, travel and many of the social and professional aspects of life as a migrant worker. The aim of the project therefore was to investigate the specifics of this for the sample of participants we were working with. Foreign language knowledge can be a requirement for entry in some countries (e.g. Japan and South Korea), though this is not the case for acquiring a visa to work in countries in the ME. Previous studies have suggested, however, that basic Arabic appears to give migrant workers to the ME some advantage in relation to those who do not have any familiarity with the language at all. This is often in terms of managing the circumstances of the employment, rather than as a skill necessary for the nature of the work itself. Rao and Hossain (2011: 629) have argued that migrants are in a better position to negotiate with employers and administrators if they know Arabic and can speak to them directly rather than through mediators.

Language ability, or the lack of it, also has other implications though. Afsar (2009) reports on migrant workers being cheated out of their contract entitlements and facing other challenges due to their lack of understanding Arabic, and some workers report having been beaten when they did not understand something or when not carrying out work properly as a result of misunderstanding (in Afsar, 2009). Furthermore, as Buchenau says, ‘Language barriers and a lack of understanding of the country’s legal system can make it difficult for migrant workers to seek legal remedies against unfair labor practices’ (Buchenau, 2008: 5). As we shall see below, a similar set of issues were experienced by the sample surveyed in this study.

Foreign language ability can also, in some instances, determine the nature of the work the migrants are offered. A number of migrant workers in a study by the IOM (2002) reported that:

lack of proficiency in language acted against their career advancement in two ways: firstly, in Bangladesh they could not fully understand the nature of the job for which they had received a visa, and on arrival they found that the job was of menial type though they had technical expertise. Secondly, sometimes technical expertise required language skills and even rudimentary language skill could have enabled them to secure a better paying job (IOM, 2002: 64).

Knowledge of English is seen as an advantage for migrant workers (Rubdy and McKay, 2013), in part because of the ideologies that link knowledge of English with general education levels (see Seargeant and Erling, 2011). Bangladeshis, however, are placed low on the hierarchy of knowing English compared to migrant workers from the Philippines or Malaysia, and thus they often face discrimination (Rubdy and McKay, 2013).

With the above as background context, the picture that emerged from the sample of participants in this study was quite clear. In broad terms, both English and local languages were deemed to be important, but with relatively separate roles. In the main, English is seen as useful for functional purposes, for example in being able to decode the names and instructions of goods and equipment (it is a lingua franca for global equipment). Furthermore it is useful as a lingua franca with other immigrants, but particularly those from US and European countries, in contexts such as hospitals and foreign firms. It was occasionally mentioned as a lingua franca in helping with disputes or problems, though local languages were thought to be more useful for this. On the other hand, local languages were considered important for the everyday aspects of doing one’s job, and for daily communication. It was the local language that was considered more useful should one get in trouble, and indeed for avoiding getting in trouble. Below are examples, detailing these different domains and purposes.

6.1.1 English as a lingua franca

The most usual use for English was to read the instructions or names of parts for ‘global goods’ – items such as automobile parts; air conditioning

diagrams; supplies for a pesticide company and so on. For example, the two participants below both specify this as an important element of their job:

Liton: *My boss in the store, my manager named Masri was happy with the fact that I knew some English. He told me to work in the store since I knew English. In the store, English was needed. Different automobile parts arrived in the store.*

Imran: *...big ACs had diagrams. You have to read those. Otherwise, you can't repair the ACs.*

There were also occasional examples of English being useful for dealing with problems, such as visa queries at the airport, particularly at the beginning of a visit when the participants did not yet have a chance to learn Arabic:

Kalam: *The day when I went to the foreign country for the first time, I had a problem. Actually, the photo in my passport was taken from another photo. That's why the picture was very blurred. When they saw this passport in the Airport in Saudi Arabia, they asked all the other passengers to move on but, they stopped me and asked me to sit in a particular place. I was trying to explain him my situation, but since he did not understand any English, he did not understand anything. Then the Captain came. I explained things to the Captain in English. The Captain understood everything and he asked me to leave. That's what happened. Many of them can't speak any English at all.*

The above example was something of an exception in the data, however, and in most scenarios of this sort knowledge of a local language was seen to be more useful (as will be detailed below). For communication purposes English was mostly used for communicating with other immigrants, with the suggestion being that immigrants are keener to use English as a lingua franca than the local language. For example, a number of participants talked of the necessity of using English with Filipino migrants:

Badol: *English, you have to speak in English with the Filipinos. They don't know any other language. They don't want to learn any other language.*

Interviewer: *Now wasn't it problematic for the Filipinos that they only spoke English?*

Badol: *No, it wasn't problematic. They only speak English, they don't give importance to you if you speak any other language. Even for very small thing, they used to use English, for example, 'bring the fan', they used to say that in English.*

In some work contexts the other workers (or owners) are from the US or Europe, and here again English is considered to be the most useful language for everyday communication:

Hakim: *I found English useful there. As I worked in a restaurant there English speaking was essential. Though I worked in Dubai but I had to talk in English.*

6.1.2 Knowledge of local languages

Other than in the contexts above, the local language was most often reported as being important for the everyday aspects of doing one's job, and for communicating with one's employers. This was stressed by a large number of participants, in various contexts:

Liton: *If you don't know the [local] language, then how will you work? The language (i.e. Arabic) is very easy. You can learn that quickly. If you do not learn that quickly, then it will happen that they asked you to bring one thing, but you brought another thing. Then they will get angry.*

Faheem: *I learned some Arabic before going to Libya. They get very angry if you don't know Arabic. They say why you have come to an Arab country if you don't know Arabic*

Piash: *I learned Korean language because if you want to work in Korea, you have to know Korean language.*

Some of the participants in fact contrasted the usefulness of local languages with English:

Interviewer: *Would there be any benefit in your work if could speak English?*

Bilkis: *Not really. English is more needed in the official work where you need to talk with a lot of people. For domestic work, Arabic is good. The thing is that you need English just after going to a new country. In the early days, there is benefit if you know English. Whenever you don't understand anything in Arabic, they can explain that to you. Similarly, you can ask something in English. That's the benefit.*

A key refrain in this context was the way that knowledge of the local language can help should one get into difficulties:

Kalam: *If you know good Arabic, no one will not disturb you even if you make some nuisance.*

Liton: *If Police asks you something, and you can reply that in good Arabic, then there will be no problem. But if you fail to answer that as you don't know Arabic very well, then you will be in trouble. The same thing happens with the Koreans. If they catch you and if you can communicate in good Korean, they release you. Even if you are illegal, but if you can explain your situation well, they would say, 'It's not my duty to arrest you. This is the job of the immigration police. This is not my job'. If you can't*

explain your situation well, they would send you back to your home country.

For several of the women in the sample, a lack of knowledge of the local language was a direct cause of mistreatment, as failure to understand comments or commands would lead to physical censure and abuse.

Bilkis: *There are lots of suffering... there are lots of torture.*

Afia: *Yes, even the children would beat you. If you don't understand their language, they would knock you hard.*

Interviewer: *Really?*

Bilkis: *Yes, domestic workers have to spend a lot of time with children. In fact, that's the main reason for hiring domestic workers. What happens is that after coming back from school, they throw bags to you. They would ask for so many things. If you don't understand what they say, they would get angry and throw at you with whatever they have with them.*

Afia: *At the beginning I had lots of problem with language. If they asked for a glass, I used to give plate. If they asked for spoons, I gave plates. In the case of such mistakes, they knocked me in my hand [smiling]. They knocked me in my head with the thing that they asked for. That's how I remembered the names of things.*

Afia: *In Bahrain, I was beaten. For example, they asked for tea. I gave tea leaves. I did not make the tea... She put her hand on my neck and moved me to tell, 'Boil the tea leaves. Make tea'. They told me things in Arabic, I did not know Arabic. There was no other Bangladeshi to help me out. That's how I worked. Sometimes, the children said me something, but I didn't understand. Then the children knocked me. But you can never have a gloomy face.*

Such examples demonstrate the particular vulnerability of female migrants, particularly if not equipped with communication skills.

6.2 Economic benefits and costs of migration

Another key focus of the research was the (perceived) relationship between language ability and economic benefit. Mass migration to the Middle East is encouraged by the Bangladeshi government, and is seen as a major opportunity to support the development of Bangladesh (Mamun and Nath, 2010: 30). It has been attributed with helping to ease the high levels of unemployment and facilitating the transformation of an unskilled workforce into a valuable resource for the country (Ahmed, 2011: 83).

Economists have also recently focused on the potential of remittances in shaping the economic progress of the nation in the face of a declining flow of external aid to Bangladesh (Zaman and Akbar, 2013). While foreign direct investment (FDI) has the largest positive effect on overall economic growth, remittances have been credited with directly alleviating poverty levels in the country by increasing recipient families' incomes and living standards (Rao and Hassan, 2012: 351, 367). In fact, one study suggests that remittances may have reduced the number of people living below the poverty level in the population by six per cent (Mamun and Nath, 2010: 41). As such, we were interested in the potential role of language in increasing the remittances of Bangladeshi migrants.

In this study we did not have any direct access to information about participants' economic situation but instead relied on what they reported in terms of economic benefit. A large majority of the participants reported profiting from the migratory experience. This, however, was not always straightforward, and not without cost. Simply because they had managed to generate income did not mean that they did not face hardship at some point in their migratory experience (in fact many of them had moved on from jobs or situations in which they were exploited). Others were stuck in situations where they would have liked to earn more, and exercise more freedoms, but the benefits of the job outweighed the disadvantages (e.g. Bilkis, Bashar). Sixteen of the participants had narratives of mostly positive outcomes; seven of them were more ambivalent about their experience; and four were very negative about the experience, with two saying they would have been better off not going abroad (e.g. Badol, who returned to Bangladesh saying that in three years he could not manage to earn back the money he spent to go abroad). These findings suggest something comparable to those of Afsar (2009: 44), who found that the migration experience was found to be positive only for 57 per cent of the participants in that study, while for 21 per cent it was mixed and for 13 per cent it was negative (i.e. losses were incurred).

All but two of the participants in this study reported being able to remit at least a small amount of money back to Bangladesh, regardless of their educational background and language knowledge, while some had clearly been able to contribute significantly to their own and their family's well-being. The participants report similar uses for the money they remitted back to Bangladesh to those reported in other studies (e.g. Burholt, 2004: 820; Mamun and Nath, 2010: 39–40; Norris, 2011: 482). Remittances are primarily used to enhance the economic well-

being of the families left behind by the migrants and to cover costs such as:

- repayment of loans, including the cost of migration
- construction and repair of houses
- purchase of land (which is one of the safest forms of investment in Bangladesh and can provide return through crop production)
- education for children (either their own or their nieces' and nephews')
- setting up and running businesses (for relatives in Bangladesh or on their return)
- savings (for retirement)
- community development (e.g. building mosques or schools).

However, while overseas migration has led to a general increase in wealth across Bangladesh, there is growing recognition of the significant personal costs of migration for individuals, who often face significant hardship, and these costs can also be seen in the narratives of the participants in this study (cf. Sharma and Zaman, 2009). There is also the question of the impact it has on the society from which the migrants travel, where many families lose an important member of the household for an extended period of time. Rahman (2000: 120), for example, argues that migration has 'drained local resources and impeded local development'. All aspirations and hope for a better future are projected on 'a temporary life outside Bangladesh' and change and development 'are not processes that seem to be possible locally' (Dannecker, 2009: 46). This study too provides examples of people who had returned from working abroad to a situation with few opportunities to apply the skills that they had developed through working abroad.

6.2.1 Factors contributing to economic success

It is difficult from the data available to determine exactly what the factors were that contributed to participants having a more positive or negative experience of migration, or to attribute any successes to language skills in particular. There were participants (e.g. Badol) with relatively high levels of education and skill and knowledge of foreign languages who did not do well out of the experience, with others coming from very disadvantaged backgrounds with very low (or non-existent) levels of formal education – and no knowledge of English – experiencing a lucky break (e.g. Bilkis, Gofur, Kalam). Interestingly, though, those who were overwhelmingly happy with their positions and their

earnings had tended to learn languages on the job (Arabic in all cases and English and other languages in others).

One aspect of the migration experience that has been established as having an impact on the migrants' success is their ability to meet the initial financial cost of obtaining a passport, visa and air fare. As our data also demonstrate, many people enter into debt to meet these costs, sometimes by mortgaging a small amount of land or taking money from a family member or a village loan shark (cf. Sharma and Zaman, 2009). These loans are often offered at high interest and can be difficult to repay:

Afia: [my husband] took the property document of my parents' house and pawned it. In this way, I managed to get 45,000 taka and went to Bahrain. That did not go very well. ...my salary was only 4000 taka. The money which I invested for going to Bahrain was on ten per cent interest. It was difficult for me to earn back the money which I invested.

Another factor that had a significant impact on the outcome is their experience with intermediaries. Because their education and literacy levels are generally low, migrants are often reliant on agents to serve as their intermediaries and negotiate their terms of work. Engaging an intermediary requires significant investment (anywhere from US\$700–2000). Deception during this process is not uncommon and often sets workers up for subsequent abuse (Afsar, 2009). In fact there is some evidence that migrants who are not very well educated are preferred by both recruiters and employers, as they might be easier to take advantage of and may be more accepting of hard working conditions (Rao and Hossain, 2011). There were several examples of participants in this study being given false promises by agents.

Pijush: In my case, I had been promised that I would be given 22/24 dollar salary per day. But in reality, I was given only 16 dollar salary per day. What could I do! I did not have any option. I came to the foreign country by selling land of my father. This happened days after days that they did not give me the salary that they promised. I had a lot of problems. ...The agents always give false promises to the workers. There is always difference between what is promised and what one gets.

Migrant workers can also be vulnerable to the whims of employers in the host countries, and there have been several recorded cases of exploitation and racial and ethnic discrimination along these lines. Many migrants do what are sometimes referred to as 'the 3-D jobs': those which are *dirty, difficult* and

dangerous, and which locals themselves often refuse to do (Jha et al, 2010: 78). Female migrant workers can often be particularly vulnerable, with reports of trafficking, forced prostitution and slave labour. The participants in this study recognised that the success of the migration experience depended heavily on the employer that the worker winds up being placed with:

Bilkis: *In the work of domestic worker, if the Malik [boss] does not want to increase your salary, your salary will not increase. Things depend on their wishes.*

So while the majority of participants in this study reported that they had experienced a significant financial gain from working abroad, this was never without cost. Education and language skills certainly play a role in a migrant's ability to negotiate migration processes such as obtaining a passport and visa and looking for a job; however, there are some factors that can influence a person's economic benefit, like the whims of the employer, that are mostly beyond control. However, language abilities could potentially play a role in the employees' ability to communicate and gain favour with their employer, as could intercultural competence (discussed further in Section 6.3.2).

6.2.2 The role of skills

All of the participants agreed that having a skill or trade was a very important – perhaps the most important – factor in 'being successful' or earning well when working abroad. For many of them, learning a trade was the most important thing that an individual could do to enhance their salary. This, they felt, was even more important than language skills, which could be learned on the job.

Hafez: *They should take vocational training at least in one area. Just having a little knowledge doesn't work there; they need to be specialised in that skill.*

Participants often noted that Bangladeshis were the lower skilled of all the migrant workers in the ME, which often meant that they got the least desirable jobs.

Rahat: *If you don't know any work and go as labourer, then you have to work very hard. On the other hand, if you are skilled in any work, then you will have less hardship.*

In this sample, the participants who had a decided career path or a trained skill in an area where work is prevalent (e.g. Imran, who learned to be an air-conditioning mechanic) seemed to have benefitted more – and fared better – during the migration experience. Other important factors mentioned were general levels of education, having certificated

education, having a driver's licence, IT skills and language skills.

Hakim: *Obviously. It is really essential to be educated. They give high importance to qualifications. They usually ask for educational qualifications.*

There is also a need for workers with IT skills, which most of the participants in this study did not have.

Liton: *...My Brigadier, the head of the line asked me 'Do you know computer work?' I replied 'Only a little bit'. He said 'If you had known computer work, I would have changed your trade' ... 'You could then work in my room'.*

Driving is another valued skill in the region, as can be seen in the example of Kaiser who got a driver's licence that enabled him to get a position as a private driver where he is treated well and satisfied with his salary.

6.2.3 Language skills

Language skills seem to play a role in participants' success in working abroad. For a few, language was felt to be the most important, while for others it was second next to skill and the ability to work hard.

Many of the participants who saw languages skills as a definite advantage worked in companies that were headed by expatriates (e.g. from India, Iran and Sudan), who generally communicated with employees in English. In such contexts, English was seen as crucial, as 'if they fail to communicate with their upper level authority they may find it hard to survive' (Hafez).

Many of those participants with strong language skills felt like this was a factor in any success they achieved. For example Sobhan, who worked in a grocery shop for some time, switched to the job of a security guard, and then got promoted as a security supervisor. He attributed the fact that he got promoted very quickly to his ability to interact in five different languages with the multilingual employees of that company.

Some people felt that being a good worker was the most important element of being successful and having a salary increase, and this was more crucial than language skills:

Monjural: *Wherever you work in the world, if you do your work seriously, the employers become happy. (Monjural)*

Interviewer: *If you can speak very good Arabic, is there a chance of getting pay raise?*

Monjurul: *No, there isn't. Language is not enough. You have to show good quality of work.*

While hard work and skill are definitely recognised as being key, language skills are seen as adding additional value to this, with English being perceived as very important.

Shihab: *Salaries increase if one can show good work and if one can do his/her work quickly.*

Interviewer: *If one knows language...?*

Shihab: *If one knows language, then salaries rapidly increase.*

Interviewer: *OK, now how could you earn more salary? You said that you were moderately happy with the salary that you earned. What might help you to raise your salary?*

Shihab: *If I knew Arabic and if I showed good work.*

Interviewer: *So, you are saying that if you knew Arabic, then it would have been better.*

Shihab: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *How about knowing English?*

Shihab: *Yes, that would have also been useful.*

But English is not the only language that is seen as of value. Arabic in particular but also Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, Tamil and Malay (particularly in Singapore) are valuable assets.

Arabic was spoken by almost everyone in the sample, with most of them learning it after their arrival. For the domestic workers, general spoken competence in Arabic seems to be a necessity. There is no financial gain for it – but it may be that it is not possible to get or keep a good job for someone who does not have any competence in Arabic. For the women, this is the only way that they could communicate with the woman of the house. All four of the female participants in this study could speak Arabic and learned it within a few months of starting their job. None of them, however, reported having competence in English.

6.2.4 Other factors which influence economic outcomes of migration

There were other factors that participants mentioned as having an impact on how much one is able to earn. One is the type of visa that Bangladeshis are issued: the majority go to the Middle East with a 'labour' visa, not a 'trade' or 'skill' visa, which has an impact on their work experience and their incomes.

Liton: *Actually, our problem was that we did not go with any skill visa. If you look at the Filipinos, they always come to Saudi Arabia with skill visa. Whether they know the work or not, their government manages to give them trade visa. ...Some of them come as 'plumber', some as 'mason'. But we, the Bangladeshis, we always come on labour or cleaner visa. That happens with everyone. Now some of them are lucky enough to get a good work environment, some of them are not very lucky. But the salary is more or less the same... Bangladeshi workers are very hard-working. Why should we get 600 riel while someone else would get 2000 riel doing similar work?*

Another factor is that the longer time that the migrant works abroad, the more likely that they will face an overall profit. The migrants who have stayed in one job for an extended period of time seem to be those who have profited the most, but they are also the ones who were lucky enough to get a decent employer and working conditions that they can endure long-term. Salaries tend to go up over time, by increments, or when a worker can demonstrate that they do good work. Also, those migrants who have gained both technical and linguistic skills at work are better placed to search for further, more profitable employment over time. These findings corroborate those of Rahman (2012), who found that the experience that they have gained (including language knowledge) helps them to find better jobs a second time.

In sum, education levels and language skills are an important factor in determining whether the overall experience will be a positive and prosperous one; however, it is clear that they are not the only factor. It is definitely the case (as the experiences of Badol shows) that migrant workers can have skills and speak the local and international language (Arabic and English) and still have a negative experience of immigration, and wind up not making a profit over all. Factors that tend to have a particularly negative impact on the migratory experience are unfair and exploitative practices of recruiters and employers, as well as high interests on loans taken out to finance the initial costs of migration. While knowledge of English and other languages can be seen as increasing the likelihood that migrants can respond well to the challenges they face, they don't rule out that they won't experience misfortune.

6.3 Cultural challenges and intercultural awareness

Beyond issues related directly to language, however, the findings of this research suggest that

participants' relative success in the migration experience relates to their ability to adjust to a new culture and establish relationships with people from different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Previous studies have found that migrant workers tend to live in 'conditions of great austerity in the country of destination' (Zaman and Akbar, 2013: 111), and have to work long hours in trying conditions. This means that they need skills such as 'patience and the humility to bear insults, the ability to deal with unfamiliar language settings in the workplace, [while also] dealing with loneliness that comes with the inability to communicate through speech' (Rao and Hossain, 2011: 625). Many of the comments and responses by the interviewees in this study touched upon challenges which ranged from surprise and disorientation to anger and isolation, and spoke to the importance of, and challenges around, cultural acclimatisation and intercultural awareness for a positive experience.

6.3.1 Culture shock

While preparation for immigration clearly has a positive impact on the migrant experience, we found little evidence for any organised or systemic preparation of the migrant workers by the agencies sending them to their host countries or when they arrived to take up work there (although, in Korea, one of the participants below does mention some training on arrival). In all cases the only pre-trip cultural orientation given was by talking to family members and peers in their community who had experience of being migrant workers overseas. This lack of preparation, of course, made them particularly vulnerable to severe culture shock and in some cases strong feelings of isolation. As we see below, appropriate language knowledge could and did help alleviate this. Other non-linguistic cultural and experiential aspects of change also had a profound part to play and, in some cases (especially evidenced by the women interviewed), migrant workers drew upon their own cultural norms in appropriate ways to help them adjust to sometimes very disorientating cultural situations, particularly domestic ones. Most of the migrant workers had little experience of travel outside of their own immediate area, and limited formal education left them with a paucity of knowledge about life in other countries.

Tellingly, a number of the migrants referred obliquely to the global inequality that they experienced in the Middle East, particularly concerning the profligate waste they witnessed in Saudi Arabia compared to the care taken with scarce resources from their own environments. The waste witnessed seemed often to be associated with food, as in this exchange:

Liton: *Now nobody ate that cake. Then the Saudi Military Officer told me, 'No one ate the cake. We are going to throw the whole cake to the river. We waste so much. That day is not far when we will have to work in our country.' How much they waste is beyond description.*

In the example above, it is not just the profligacy of food wastage that shocks, it is the fact that (in this case at least) no sense of social justice is shown by offering the excess food to the migrant workers.

In a later exchange one of the participants describes his experience of working in a hospital and again the shock of global inequality was made clear:

Kalam: *They had so many empty rooms in that hospital. Plenty of hospital beds were empty. I doubt whether the Dhaka Medical College Hospital has in total so many rooms as the empty rooms of that hospital. In every room there were two TVs, one seat, one computer.*

It was also often the ordinary environmental experiences that were inevitably the vehicles for initial culture shock. Food and weather were talked about a great deal, with some complaining about the fact that they had to work hard outside in the heat of the Arabian day. There were some strong feelings expressed about different food cultures with one migrant quitting his job because of the food provided.

This dissonance of feeling in being in a totally culturally unfamiliar environment, and often without the language or support to be able to share feelings about it, was reported on by several of the participants as a feeling of isolation. This was particularly (and perhaps not surprisingly) reported on in very early stages of migration. The isolation might temporarily be mediated by being part of a group, as in the example below where the participant describes travelling for the first time to Malaysia:

Razzak: *When I first went to Malaysia, I had fears. I was afraid of what I would do; where I would live. In the airport, I found two other persons from my neighbouring village who were also going to Malaysia. I felt better. That gave me some courage. We were in the same group, so I thought that whatever happens, that would happen to all of us. They were experienced. They knew the language. In the airport, I followed them. In this way, I got myself into the plane.*

Several of the participants talked about the intense fear that this isolation can bring, one saying "this fear is within everyone". This fear and isolation could be exacerbated by a lack of ability to communicate, and to understand the cultural norms of the system.

For the many workers without official papers, and therefore working illegally, this fear is particularly intense, with, presumably, no knowledge of their rights and how legal representation could be accessed.

Interviewer: *Were you illegal?*

Baddol: *Yes, I was a legal worker for one year and an illegal worker for two years. I had lots of tension in my mind. I always had the amount of the ticket price ready in my pocket. I knew if I get caught, I would be sent to Bangladesh.*

6.3.2 Intercultural communication

All of the migrants talked about the wide range of people from various nationalities and cultures that they worked with. The need for intercultural reference and learning was clearly an important aspect of having a 'successful' experience, and this required more than just relating to the host country. The Bangladeshi participants in this study worked with people from all over the world, and shared (often cramped) accommodation with people from many nations in the Middle East, North Africa, the Far East and South Asia. Generally the participants, while often being deeply disturbed by the intercultural differences mentioned previously, seemed to adapt to working and living with people from multiple nationalities and cultures. Language was often an important issue, as detailed below, but some talked about how they drew on their own resources to help overcome this:

Interviewer: *Was communication an issue while working abroad?*

Quader: *No. At first I faced little bit of problem but could easily understand the gestures of others. Sometimes I felt like if I could speak Bangla it would feel better but I had to accept the circumstance as there weren't any other Bangladeshi people.*

The necessity of at least some degree of intercultural communication was made clear, to differing degrees, by all the participants. Although some seemed to spend most of their time with fellow Bangladeshis, most had a much more intercultural experience both at work and domestically. Living and working in such close proximity to people from so many other nationalities and cultures clearly involved a degree of intercultural dexterity for practical as well as social reasons. As discussed in Section 5.2, although the participants may have had few language skills before going abroad, they seem to have, partly through necessity, gained most of their language skills during their stay overseas. Many of them report having competence in a number of languages.

Imran: *We, the Bangladeshi know all the languages. Wherever we need to communicate with someone, we use the language which is the most appropriate.*

Throughout the interviews there is a strong sense that the migrants felt ill-prepared for the cultural changes of working overseas, and when one considers that few of them are likely to have had previous opportunities for absorbing and living with intercultural difference, the full implications of the cultural change which will affect every aspect of life, become quite distressing. Some would have had a little preparation for living in a multilingual environment through learning English and perhaps some Arabic at school or the madrassa. None of the participants mentioned any pre-departure or in-country training to introduce them to the very different cultural practices and environmental realities of the Middle East, although we were told that in Korea some training was provided to introduce migrant workers to the life and culture of the country. Probably (and not surprisingly) most information about the new cultural realities to be experienced by the migrant workers was garnered through social interaction with friends and relatives who had been before. The advice that the veteran migrants felt they should offer to prospective migrants was generally more about the realities of inadequate and unfair processes in migration rather than real intercultural differences, as can be witnessed in this exchange:

Interviewer: *What advice would you give to someone willing to work in foreign countries?*

Baddol: *I would say that one has to be very sure of the work situation, visa, company, salary etc. This is very important. People suffer even after being well-informed about everything. And if you go without being well-informed, then there will be lots of suffering. If you collect information first and then you go, you will have less suffering. In my case, they told me that everything is OK. There wouldn't be any problem. But the reality was opposite. They told me about one job, but I was given another job. They told me that I would be given this amount of salary, but in reality, I got different amount of salary. So, I would advise someone to be well-informed before one migrates.*

It was interesting to note that the women domestic workers interviewed, while clearly living very limited lives in terms of their freedoms, seemed in some cases and in some ways to establish themselves within their cultural environment more successfully than those working in other fields. This may be because they were in a more influential position with looking after a house and children. One of the women

referred to the very deep bonds that built up with the children, and even the mothers of the children over a period of time. As the quote below shows, this constitutes a markedly different element of the experience from the mistreatment discussed above.

Bilkis: *The children sometimes call me four times a day. The nine-year-old ones call me 'Mom'. He says, 'where did you leave me, mom? When will you come back?' I say that I am in Bangladesh, son. He says, 'Where will I sleep? Will I sleep in the toilet or in the kitchen? I reply, 'Why? You can sleep in my room.' ...I grew up all the children. I take good care of the family. What to eat, not to waste. Madam now loves me like her own sister.*

This integration, particular to domestic workers, was only within the immediate family and not within Middle Eastern society as a whole, as in most cases, women did not venture beyond the domain of the household they served.

6.3.3 Status

There is some indication in this study that migrant workers are able to improve their status (at least in their home country) by working abroad. In most cases the status of the migrant workers was low in the host country. Partially, it seems, because the status of migrant workers generally is low, and there are indications that there is a strong nationality pecking order of status (in the Middle East at least) and Bangladeshis seem to be low in that order. Some noted that Bangladeshis do not tend to have a high status, with some being perceived of as 'rustic' or 'untrustworthy'.

Imran: *The Saudis now trust the Bangladeshis less than they used to do. Just for example, you did something bad. The Saudis would say that the whole Bangladeshis are bad. That's why we the Bangladeshis did not do very well (in Saudi Arabia).*

Others, however, seem to be asserting a strong sense of Bangladeshi identity and expecting others to learn Bangla, not only that Bangladeshis learn their languages:

Rahat: *I even speak in Bangla with the Saudi Arabians. Often people laugh at that. I tell them that look, first, I will speak in my mother tongue. If they don't understand, then I will speak in other languages. They laugh at that. People who work in my shop now understand some Bangla.*

The status of the workers was unlikely to have been high in their villages in Bangladesh, but in many

cases it would have been on an equal footing to most of their peers. It is, however, interesting to note that seven of the participants in this study, roughly a quarter of the sample, noted that their fathers had died when they were young, which might mean that their families faced particular hardship. Overseas, with a range of cultural pressures and differences, status issues were bound to be even more significant, and it seems difficult for Bangladeshi migrants to escape disadvantage.

Most of the migrant workers were clear that their status in their Bangladeshi communities did increase on returning home. This echoes Afsar et al. (2002), who found that remittances have contributed to families increasing their social and cultural capital, with two-thirds of respondents in a survey stating that economic migration had ensured them 'a self-sufficient status for themselves and their families', and one-tenth reporting 'an enhancement in social status' (in Moses, 2009: 462). The participants in the present study partially attributed their increased status to the fact that they were now perceived as having more experience of life, but mainly, it seems, that the assumed accumulation of wealth was a major factor in their enhanced status:

Liton: *Yes, my importance has increased in the community... People value me as I worked abroad for a long time. Everyone thinks that I must have earned a lot of money since I worked abroad. Only I know how much money I have earned. Whenever they form a committee for anything, they put me in that committee.*

However, the financial advantages while working abroad could also backfire when returning home and two of the participants implied that their status actually diminished on return, which they link to the fact that they are now no longer sending money back to the community:

Hafez: *During my stay overseas I managed to send good amount of money to my family and some relatives. Relatives and neighbours were very appreciative of my success. Though I had difficult time earning money for the family, the moment I got the money and could send to family, the pain was eased. But now that I have come back, the attitude of my community has changed a bit. They are surprised hearing that I came back here permanently. They are a bit suspicious too.*

The women migrants had markedly different experiences of status on return home to the men. Although one of them felt her status had risen (through sending money) one felt that it had made no

difference at all. There was, overall, far less certainty about status advantages and a clear indication by some that women were looked down on for going abroad as migrants by their local communities in the first place:

Afia: *Someone said good things and someone said bad things.*

Interviewer: *What did they say?*

Bilkis: *75 per cent of the people said that working in foreign countries is bad.*

Interviewer: *Why do you think they said so?*

Bilkis: *You know all those reasons. There is lack of security and others... work situation is not good.*

Interviewer: *Did they mean it only for women or for men also?*

Bilkis: *No, they meant it only for women.*

Here Bilkis hints at what other research has found: there is a strong stigma attached in Bangladesh to migrant work for women, and women who have worked overseas often have to face exclusion and stigmatisation on their return (Bélanger and Rahman, 2013: 366). The source of women's income is viewed with suspicion and their 'morality' questioned. Even their economic contributions do not necessarily grant them a higher position in the patriarchal society (Callan, 2007; Rozario, 2007).

For many of the participants in this study, the return to their villages is not the end of the story. Many will be going back again repeatedly as migrant workers, and will have benefited from the range of experiences they will have gathered. For those with no prior experience, however, it is clear that there need to be provisions both in terms of language skills and intercultural awareness.

7

Conclusion

As outlined above, the aim of this research was to explore the types of linguistic resources that migrant workers from Bangladesh to the Middle East found important, and particularly the role that English played in their experience, and the extent to which they relate skills in English with economic gain or other aspects of success. The findings show that participants recognise the importance of language skills in the process of migration in a variety of contexts and throughout its entire course, beginning prior to departure. Basic literacy in Bangla and/or English is needed to navigate the experience of filling out visa and job applications pre-departure. If the individual does not have these skills, then intermediaries can be engaged, but these tend to incur a significant cost that sets the migrant up for further difficulty and potential exploitation.

Once abroad, literacy skills in the mother tongue (Bangla) no longer seem to play a particularly significant role. However, competence in the local language of the host country – which for most participants in this study was Arabic – was seen almost as a necessity in terms of managing the circumstances of employment, understanding what was going on around them and as protection from being cheated and keeping oneself out of harm's way. Participants who know the local languages are given superior responsibilities and are more trusted by their employers. Nearly everyone in this study had managed to gain some proficiency in Arabic – some of them obtaining quite high-level skills – simply from day-to-day life. For the most part, it was competence in spoken Arabic that participants had gained, and little mention was made of reading and writing abilities.

Participants reported that apart from knowing Arabic, proficiency in English is an added advantage, depending on the job held. For those involved with domestic work, for example, English is probably not that important, as they rarely need to communicate outside the household. Where writing and reading English were mentioned as important skills was in terms of reading instructions and product descriptions for various jobs. Special mention was also made of skills in spoken English as the language is regularly used as a lingua franca among the diverse group of people working in the Middle East.

On the whole, participants noted that there is a link between language competence and the ability to earn more; however, many of them noted that having a recognised skill in an established profession (perhaps with a certificate or visa recognising that skill) was the most significant way to increase your earnings. IT skills were also mentioned as being important. For the most part however these skills were non-existent among participants, although many of them have the basic IT literacy required to contact friends and families at home, make financial transactions and also to use technology for general recreational purposes (e.g. films). Language skills on top of any of these technical skills were an added bonus. Many participants noted that the people who got the better jobs and earned the most tended to speak English, but there are also examples in the data of people with higher skills and language abilities who face significant hardship and exploitation. To a certain extent, therefore, the outcome of the experience of migration depends on the whims of the intermediaries and employers. Higher levels of education and language skills may help migrant workers navigate these difficult experiences and turn them in their favour, but they do not protect them from adversity. Another factor that had a positive impact on individuals' income is the length of time that they worked abroad. Over time, many of the participants had worked themselves into more lucrative or comfortable positions, which were enabled by the skills and language competences that they achieved along the way.

The ability to adapt to new cultures and environments and communicate with people from different backgrounds appears also to be key to the relative success of the migratory experience. Those domestic workers who had integrated into the Middle Eastern families they served tended to be happier and to earn quite well, although often still not as well as they thought they should. Moreover, those who had abilities in the languages of the other migrant workers (e.g. Hindi, Urdu, Malay, Chinese) noted that they tended to be well liked and successful (e.g. 'the special Bangladeshi').

A number of the migrant workers in this study felt that they had been able to improve their status in their home country by working abroad – but this was

certainly not always the case. Some felt that they were treated with suspicion after their return, and others felt that there was always a pressure to send increasingly larger amounts of money. The women in the study in particular felt that they were looked at with suspicion by their home communities. For rural women, however, working abroad is one of the only options open to them for earning an income that can support their family. It therefore seems especially important that they have access to information, support and skills development that can make their transition to work in the Middle East easier; and it is this that we turn to in the final section of the report.

Implications and Recommendations

This study adds to the growing body of evidence that indicates that efforts should be made to maximise the potential development return of migrant workers and minimise their individual costs in order to increase the development impact of Bangladeshis living and working abroad. In exploring the research questions that this study posed, the project sheds light on the challenges that migrants face in the process of migration and the types of resources that they need to make the experience more positive and/or successful.

Traditionally it has been individuals' social networks which play the most crucial role in spreading information about the opportunities and risks of migration (Afsar, 2009: 17). There is a growing recognition however of the need for better access to information, language learning and skills development for people embarking on economic migration of the sort studied in this research (e.g. Afsar, 2009; Jha et al, 2010). In the context of Bangladesh, the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) has thus recently been made responsible for organising one-day pre-departure briefing sessions, to aid with this. In the opinion of commentators such as Siddiqui (2011), however, more extensive provision is also necessary:

Before embarking on short-term contract migration, migrant workers should receive pre-departure orientation training. Information about the destination country, work conditions, rights and duties under the legal regime of the country concerned and under international law should be disseminated through such training. The government may consider not providing such training itself, but encouraging selected specialized agencies, NGOs, and migrant support groups to impart residential, pre-departure orientation training in different migration-prone areas. Women migrants may be specially trained to handle sexual exploitation at work and reach out to avenues for redress (Siddiqui and Sikdar, 2004).

Beyond pre-departure training, the current study has shown that there are very few opportunities for skills development and language learning once someone is working abroad. While many of the participants did develop skills and language competence in situ, there was no organised or formal help, and all learning came by way of daily experience.

Regarding the potential of English language provision for migrants, the data suggests that any provision should target the specific types of English used by migrants, but also recognise that local languages are also extremely important, as are intercultural communication skills. Spoken language skills seem to be of particular importance given the contexts in which English and local languages are most frequently used, but the participants' responses also show that in some cases, reading and writing skills are necessary. Examples of the areas in which English and other language skills are most often needed include the following:

- Basic conversational skills (within a family or company)
- Discussing and negotiating pay, job descriptions, work load, facilities
- Household and cooking vocabulary for domestic workers
- Talking about health issues (e.g. at hospital)
- Understanding local laws and exchanges with the law
- Filling out forms (e.g. visa applications, arrival cards, financial transactions, etc.)
- Writing shopping lists
- Reading machine manuals, product descriptions, etc.
- Understanding technical diagrams.

Beyond this type of language provision, the following skills appear also to be of great importance:

- Intercultural communication skills (e.g. for conversations with co-workers from other language backgrounds with whom they are likely to spend time)
- Cultural awareness (e.g. learning about the local culture and traditions).

Such language provision might then also be able to prepare people for, or support them through, the culture shock and isolation that they experience in the initial stages of their time abroad. One way of providing such support would be for ex-migrants to share their experiences and strategies in order to help future migrants to become 'psychologically ready' to work abroad.

As participants in this study tended to have mobile phones, any language and preparatory provision could potentially be provided on mobile phones (or on SD cards that can be used in mobile phones and would not require internet connectivity). In doing so, such provision could also aim to enhance the IT skills of migrants.

It is clear that migrant workers are in need of support and opportunities for skills and language development. However, beyond this there are wider issues – such as the status of their visas, corruption among intermediaries, and adequate protective legislation and/or representation that need to be dealt with at the national and international levels. Most major destination countries have not ratified the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (Mamun and Nath, 2010: 36). Migrant workers are also subject to political turmoil in the host country, as was the case in Libya in 2011 where migrants lost their assets, cash and – in some cases – their lives, as a result of the political crisis (Siddiqui and Bhuiyan, 2013). So while appropriate skills and language development opportunities are a clear priority, they can only have impact within a wider attempt to minimise the plight of migrant workers from rural Bangladesh to the Middle East and provide fair and just opportunities for them to enhance their capabilities and economic opportunities.

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