

English language proficiency and employment: A case study of Bangladeshi graduates in Australian employment market

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Recent literature has suggested that the relationship between globalisation and the English language implicates employability in the job market. Although the effects are uneven in different occupational groups and in different countries, such relationship is growing in significance to policy makers. This paper has explored the hitherto unstudied relationship between English language proficiency and employment and the success of Bangladeshi graduates in Australia to establish how English language skills influence the employment mechanism in the Australian job market for graduates from a non-English speaking South East Asian country. The study was carried out following an interpretive approach as its overall aim was to understand the role of English language skills of university graduates in determining their employment opportunities and career prospects in Australia. It was found that in various ways one's English language skills influence prospects of employment, especially in contributing to the possibility of "secure" and "better" jobs. The research findings may inform educational policy planners, teacher educators, employers and career advisers to optimise English language learning programs that support increased employability through English.

Introduction

A competitive employment market requires good communication skills in workplaces. Within that, increasingly under globalisation, English as communication skills plays a crucial role in employment (see Dustmann & Fabbr, 2003; Erling, Seargeant, Solly, Chowdhury, & Rahman, 2012; Kossoudji, 1988; Rivera-Batiz, 1990; Shields & Price, 2002; Tainer, 1988) all over the world. English is often a decisive factor in employment opportunities with higher earnings (Bleakley & Chin, 2004; Casale & Posel, 2011; Chiswick, 1991; Chiswick & Miller, 1995; Davila & Mora, 2000; Dustmann & Fabbr, 2003; Tainer, 1988) and in organisations aiming at higher productivity (Tainer, 1988). On the other hand, people who are incompetent in English face difficulty in finding jobs, especially well-paid jobs (Carliner, 2000; Leslie & Lindley, 2001). Lack of English fluency drives to earning losses (Dustmann & Fabbr, 2003; Leslie & Lindley, 2001). Proficiency in English therefore, is needed for employees to advance in both local and international companies and to improve their technical knowledge and skills. It provides a foundation for what has been called "process skills" - problem-solving and critical thinking skills that are needed to cope with the rapidly changing environment of the global workplace, one where English plays an increasingly important role.

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Globalisation has an enormous impact on the labour market by generating the flow and mobility of skilled labour from one place to another, one country to another country, one part of the world to another part. The “globalisation of human capital” through international migration is widely crystallised from developing countries to developed countries (Khadria, 2001). Further, globalisation also has a deep relation with English language. Globalisation and English language are both said to work as pull factors for one another and both have insightful impact on employment (Debrah & Smith, 2002), and have been associated with profound changes in the labour market (Orbeta, 2002). Together, globalisation and English language have enabled local actors to become part of global networks (Sassen, 2004). For example, a non-English background migrant works in an English speaking context where his local English is used in a global context and his level of English plays an important role in his employment trajectory in a global society.

This paper explores how proficiency in English relates to job opportunities for Bangladeshi migrants and international students in Australia. In other words, this paper investigates the role of the English language proficiency of Bangladeshi university graduates in the Australian job market against the backdrop of a globalised 21st century. Special focus will be given to what extent competence in English can be accounted to be behind their employment successes and failures.

This qualitative study involved seven Bangladeshi participants, of whom five were employed and two unemployed. This article begins with a review of empirical studies on English and employment market. Then it presents an overview of Australian job market followed by the role of English language proficiency in the Australian job market. The findings have been discussed under categories such as participants’ views on the Australian job market, the role of English within this setting and their perceived skill levels. Findings also discuss whether better English language skills could bring better opportunities for Bangladeshi employees in the job market in Australia. Finally, a brief comparison is made with job status of graduates from other countries and some problems as commonly experienced in the Australian job market.

Empirical studies on English and employment

Language skills are an essential tool in the labour market. What is the relation between English language proficiency and its impacts on labour market performance, advantages and failures, several studies, for instance, Casale and Posel (2011), Dustmann (1999), Dustmann and Fabbr (2003), Leslie and Lindley (2001), Lindley (2002), Schellekens (2001) have analysed this issue. Chiswick and Miller conducted a number of empirical studies (please see Chiswick, 1991; Chiswick & Miller, 1995, 1998, 2002) on the relationship between migrants’ language skills and their earnings in host countries. They argue that language proficiency has a positive result on earnings.

Lindley (2002) explores earning gaps between fluent and non-fluent ethnic male and female minorities as well as the determinants of English language fluency in Britain. Findings show that the average earnings of both ethnic groups of minority in Britain are significantly affected by lack of fluency. There is an economic cost to English language deficiency in jobs and occupations. In a study on labour market opportunities of Hispanic and East Asian immigrant men, Kossoudji (1988) suggests that deficiency in English is costly both in earning and occupational mobility. She found that Hispanics have a higher cost for English language deficiency than Asians at every skill level. In another study conducted in England and Wales, Schellekens (2001) shows that lack of proficiency in English works as an obstacle to the employment market. If people are employed, they are employed at a level below than their qualifications and experience. Similarly, in a developing country context like South Africa, it was found that people who are very well in reading and writing along with tertiary education receive a great return (Casale & Posel, 2011). Considering language as a human capital, Tainer (1988) argues that English language proficiency works as determination of earnings and plays an effective role in earnings of foreign born ethnic groups. In addition, language deficiency impedes the opportunities for getting jobs that fully recognize one’s

qualifications. In a study on ethnic minority in the UK, Shields and Price (Shields & Price, 2002) argue that occupational advantages and success relatively depend on English language fluency.

To summarize the previous studies, it can be said that proficiency in English has deep influence on job market, especially in a country where English is the main language of the host country. Studies have also established that across a wide range of settings, English language fluency is associated with higher salary. English language aptitude works as one of the important determining factors to get a job, to earn higher salary, and get other advantages in employment market. To that extent, English language fluency has been considered as human capital (Dustmann, 1999; Dustmann & Fabbr, 2003).

While a number of recent studies have been conducted connecting English and employability in specific countries, still little attention has been given to English and employability of international students and immigrants together, it is still not clearly evident how English language skills play a role in the employment mechanism for country-specific non-English immigrants and international students in an English speaking country, such as Bangladeshi graduates in Australia, which has seen a steady rise of newly arrived Bangladeshi migrants in recent years. From 2008-2009 to 2010-2011, a total of 6655 Bangladeshis were added as permanent residents in Australia while from June 2010 to June 2011, a total of 1727 Bangladeshis came to Australia with long-stay Temporary Business Visa (DIAC, 2011). In addition, a large number of students are coming to Australia every year.

While visa requirements mean that most undergo some form of English proficiency test, their actual English skills widely vary, and such variety is often reflected in what kind of job they secure. The objective of this paper therefore, is to find out how Bangladeshi graduates in Australia perceive and interpret the importance of English language proficiency in terms of its articulation with individual trajectories in the Australian workplace.

An overview of the Australian job market

Karunaratne (1999) explains that as a consequence of the liberalisation of trade barrier, decontrol of monetary marketplace, development of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and decrease in transportation charges, Australia can be said to have stepped into the globalised world in the 1980s. Ranked second in the United Nations 2010 Human Development Index, Australia now follows a laissez-faire free market economy which ranked third in the Index of Economic Freedom in 2010; Australia is highly dependent on raw materials and rural products. As a developed, industrialised country Australia simultaneously experiences post-industrialisation and globalisation with a prosperous multicultural society which is among the world's top rated in terms of cultural offerings and quality of life. It is a member country of the United Nations, Commonwealth, G20, OECD (Organisation for Economic Corporation and Development) and the World Trade Organization.

Lansbury and Wailes (2004) argue that well-built economic development and a decline in real wages enlarge the labour market and also cut the rate of joblessness. Unemployment in the mid-1990s persisted at levels of 8.11 per cent but fell in the second half of the 1990s and was 6.7 per cent in 2001. Despite the global financial crisis in 2009, this rate was strong at 5.6 per cent in December, 2009 and 5.2 per cent in December 2011 as reported in Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2012). However, the structure of employment has changed radically in recent years with the decline of full-time permanent work and the expansion of various kinds of non-standard forms of employment. This has occurred as a result of increase in casual work, temporary jobs, outsourcing, and the use of agencies and other labour market intermediaries. It presents the Australian employment structure is disaggregated (Campbell, Whitehouse, & Baxter, 2009) as reflected in this study where participants were employed in different types of jobs such as full-time and part-time, standard and non-standard jobs.

As a result of a relatively steady and sound economy, and following the dominant trends of recent transnational migrations, Australia has become one of the most obvious choices for international students and migrants alike (Chowdhury, 2008). Every year the number of international students and immigrants are increasing in Australia. In addition to permanent settlement migration, there are eight major categories of temporary migrants such as Working Holiday Maker (WHM), Long-stay business, short-stay business and so forth including overseas students and their spouses to Australia who have legal right to work (please see Hugo, 2006). The impact of these temporary migrants is equivalent to more than 400,000 full-time jobs (Hugo, 2006). Such flow of workforce to Australia has become a public debate in recent times. It is said that immigrants are “job robbers” (Chang, 2003), taking the jobs of Australians, going straight to dole queues, preventing Australians from getting wage rise, and lowering Australians productivity (Brooks, 1996). However, it is also argued that skilled immigrants are progressively achieving positive outcomes in the Australian labour market (Ho & Alcorso, 2004), adding to Australia’s skill base, stimulating economic activity (Brooks, 1996) and creating jobs (Chang, 2003). The Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA) demonstrated that generally, skilled migrants have better labour market outcomes (Cobb-Clark, 2000) than family-based immigrants. A large number of studies established that despite the fears of some commentators, immigration overall does not increase unemployment rate, rather is likely to be viewed as an economic success (Brooks, 1996).

However, the mobility of skilled labour into Australia may not have affected unemployment rate, since immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds have higher unemployment rates than immigrants from English speaking backgrounds or those Australian born (Brooks, 1996). One of the important reasons for this scenario is the lack of adequate English language skills of non-English speaking background immigrants as reflected in the data collected for this study. The following section discusses the role of English language in the Australian job market.

The nexus between English language skills and employability in Australia

Labour market success depends on a variety of indicators. It is argued that in the Australian job market, employers’ first preference is graduates’ profession-specific skills followed by their ‘well-roundedness’ which refers to personal characteristics and attributes, including English language proficiency (Arkoudis et al., 2009). Syed and Murray’s (2009) study found English language proficiency to be prerequisite for most jobs in Australia. Other studies have shown that English language plays a critical role in getting employed and to succeed in the job market. It has also been observed that “the better the English, the higher the participation rates” (DIMIA, 2002, p. 8). The LSIA similarly demonstrated that migrants with high levels of qualifications and English language ability attain better outcome in terms of employment, earnings and occupational status than migrants with a lower level of such human capital attributes (Ho & Alcorso, 2004; Syed & Murray, 2009). Using LSIA data, Ho and Alcorso (2004) showed the employment outcome of English speaking and non-English speaking migrants in relation with their birthplace. They established that, in comparison between migrants from English speaking backgrounds and non-English speaking backgrounds, the first cohort is a better achiever in terms of employment outcomes (i.e. employment and unemployment rates, occupational status, and use of qualifications) than the second cohort.

Research identifies that a lower level of English language skills works as a barrier to immigrants’ labour market achievement and success (Brooks, 1996; Evans, 1987; Stevens, 2005), which can sometimes cause the job loss (Syed & Murray, 2009). Indeed, recognising such inextricable relation between English language skills and employability (Kim, Ehrich, & Ficorilli, 2011, in press), the Australian government has taken steps to run projects such as AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Service) to develop English language proficiency of immigrants (Kim et al., 2011, in press; Syed & Murray, 2009).

Study Design

As the purpose of the study was not to generalise, rather to achieve an in-depth understanding of the complexities of the English language proficiency of Bangladeshi graduates in the Australian labor market, a qualitative case study was considered appropriate. In this qualitative method of inquiry, the aim was to understand how non-native English speaking Bangladeshi sojourners' English proficiency had an impact on their career trajectories in the Australian context. The case study was followed as a strategy of inquiry where in-depth explorations of multiple bounded systems (cases) (Creswell, 2007) were adopted through in-depth data collection.

Data were collected using an interview schedule through in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews conducted face to face and over the telephone. All interviews were digitally audio recorded. The duration of each interview was approximately 30-40 minutes and the language of interview was both English and Bangla for the convenience of participants to ensure the participants could speak comfortably. All audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim while the interviews collected in Bangla were thematically translated into English. All interviews were coded thematically following interview questions. The questions for interview were open-ended (see Appendix) which were related to career profiles of the participants before and after coming to Australia, their aims in coming to Australia, their perceptions of the Australian labour market, the role of English language in this job market, the place of Bangladeshis in this market with their English language proficiency and challenges and issues faced in jobs related to English language proficiency.

Interview questions were directed to a total of seven participants – Bangladeshis living in Melbourne. Samples were selected purposively for maintaining a variety of participants. Another reason for choosing purposive sampling was to get access to participants to collect data. Before collecting data, the authors communicated with the participants and later took their interview at their convenient time and place.

Among the participants, all Bangladeshi graduates, five were employed and two were unemployed and were looking for jobs at the time of the interviews. In addition, two participants had also obtained Australian degrees. All participants had work rights in the Australian job market with two participants holding student visas, two Australian resident visas while the rest (three) holding spouse visas. Participants worked in different categories of jobs such as teaching, technology support, customer service, kitchen hand and cleaning either full-time or part-time. Their work experience ranged from one to five years. The age range of the participants was 28 to 66 years. Before coming to Australia, all participants except one were employed in their home country. Most of the participants sat for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) in Bangladesh before coming to Australia while others, who were on spouse visa did not. More details of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

In order to ensure the validity of data, one researcher coded interview data while the other cross checked. In addition, transcripts were sent back to participants to check if their comments were properly presented in the paper.

Participants' profiles:

In the table below, the participants' profiles are shown according to the length of stay in Australia.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

No	Name, age and gender	Academic qualifications	IELTS overall band	Job Experience in Bangladesh	Length of job Experience in Bangladesh	Duration in stay in Australia	Present job
1.	Hasabi, 40 (M)	*Bachelor (Hons.), Master in Physics, Bangladesh * Diploma in Networking, Australia	7	Lecturer	2 years	9 years	Technology Support Officer in a govt. office (Full-time)
2.	Urboshi, 36, (F)	*Bachelor (Hons.), Master in English Literature, Bangladesh * Master in TESOL, Australia	8	Lecturer	2 years	9 years	Lecturer in English at a University (Full-time)
3.	Tonni, 30 (F)	Bachelor (Hons.), Master in Geography & Environment, Bangladesh	Not appeared	No job experience	-	4.5 years	Unemployed and seeking a job
4.	Rafiq, 28 (M)	Bachelor (Hons.), Master in Management, Bangladesh	6	Coder (part-time) in an NGO	6 months	1.5 years	Cleaning (Part-time)
5.	Sumi, 38 (F)	Bachelor (Hons.), Master in Sociology, Bangladesh	Not appeared	Senior Research Officer, in an NGO	9 years	1 year	Kitchen hand (Part-time)
6.	Azam, 66 (M)	Bachelor of Science and Master of Education, Bangladesh	Not appeared	College Teacher	31 years	1.5 years	Customer service (Part-time)
7.	Mahmud, 40 (M)	Bachelor (Hons.), Master in English Literature, Bangladesh	7	Govt. College Teacher	10 years	6 months	Unemployed and seeking a job

Findings and discussions

The major findings of the study as well as a critical discussion are outlined in the following sections as aligned with the main inquiries.

Perceptions about the Australian job market

One of the main concerns of this study was the participants' general perceptions of the Australian job market. While most of the participants thought that it was in a "complicated" state involving the various determinants of the national and global economy, others were quite satisfied with the present employment scenario. It was observed that among seven participants, four argued that the Australian job market had a "crisis" of jobs and was "under pressure". However, one of them opined that this pressure was mainly on part-time jobs. She stated that "for one post in a factory we about 70 candidates faced interview". Two participants attributed this "crisis" to the number of people outnumbering the jobs. They stated that every year many people were coming to Australia from other countries being students and immigrants and this created a "job crisis".

Unsurprisingly however, two participants contended that the job market was "good", even though they also agreed that "the global economic recession had also badly impacted the job crisis since such recession has also promoted people to come to this country to have a secured life". Tonni and Hasabi were optimistic however that this recession was gradually being overcome. For instance, he noted that on a popular job website, the number of advertised jobs was increasing every day. It

appeared that Hasabi was quite well informed about the job market. Indeed, one participant (Urboshi) argued that the Australian job market was very “competitive”. She explained “it is not very easy to get a job at the beginning. Job seekers need to prepare themselves and keep themselves up to date for jobs”. In general, it can be said that participants had mixed perceptions about the Australian job market.

Perceptions on the role of English language in the Australian job market

As previously discussed, English language has generally been seen as one of the important determinants of employment in recent decades in the English-speaking West. It is argued that English language has a positive impact on employment and earnings. One of the aims of this study was to explore the importance of English in the Australian job market as perceived by Bangladeshis. It was argued by six of the participants that to get a job in Australian job market, proficiency in English played a very “important” and a “vital” role. Azam explained:

It is number one criteria to get a job. Here English is 90%. Although I am working at customer services in a Bangla shop, here I speak 90% in English.

Shields & Price (2002) argued that occupational success is associated with speaking fluency. However, Urboshi argued that “to get a job, English is very important but it is not necessary to be like native speakers of English”. Like Urboshi, Tonni also contended the significance of English in the Australian job market. Further, she placed more emphasis on listening and speaking skills rather than reading and writing, as far as employment was concerned. Sumi similarly reported:

Every employee faces interview before getting a job. If s/he is not suitable for the respective job in terms of English language, s/he will not get the job.

However, not all participants were in agreement as to the importance of communication skills in English. Mahmud argued: “I think English language is not a much significant issue in the Australian job market”. He observed that most of the students or migrants other than spouses he knew had a certain level of English fluency. He also argued:

If we are in an English speaking country, our English is fine. It’s not an advantage because almost 99% people speak well English. It is not a big issue. The big issue is how much skill the person has. If anyone wants to work in a restaurant or a saloon, s/he needs a certificate or qualification in respective jobs. It is very important here.

Such finding is consistent with the findings of Arkoudis, et al., (2009) as discussed earlier that in Australia employers’ prime concern is job specific skills of the graduates. Their next concern is graduates’ personal characteristics and attributes, including English language skills. Like Mahmud, Hasabi and Tonni also emphasised on the relative importance of skills and job experience side by side with English language. In fact, Hasabi asserted that skills and job experience were more important than language and argued that here employers knew that “language problem” was only temporary which would be overcome gradually, but that there was no short-cut to experience. However, two participants talked about yet other two important inter-related factors they thought were important in getting a job in Australia: network and reference. Mahmud stated: “sometimes reference is also a vital issue to get a job”. He explained that no matter where one stands with English skills, if you know people around, it certainly helps in getting a job. As noted in previous studies, good networks increase chances of getting a better job (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). The importance of such “social capital” of friends and relatives in getting a job was supported by studies by Wahba and Zenou (2005), Calvó-Armengol and Zenou (2005), Stoloff, Glanville, and Bienenstock (1999), and Topa (2001).

Earlier although most of the participants undoubtedly testified the importance of English in getting jobs, four participants contended that English skills were not so important in sustaining or being promoted in jobs. Like Rafiq and Sumi, Urboshi observed: “after getting a job, it is more important

to prove yourself in what you are doing rather than how good your English is". Likewise, Hasabi asserted that "after getting a job, language becomes secondary and job becomes primary". However, Azam argued: "English language is important not only in getting a job but also to sustain and being promoted in a job".

It therefore appeared that there were contrary opinions with regard to the relative importance of English in securing and sustaining a job in Australia. This indicates that while English certainly played an important role in the participants' employment, related professional experience nonetheless played a bigger role in certain cases in which communication skills were not primary. Nevertheless, communication skills play role as a key factor to employers and other representatives of the commercial world (Cameron, 2002) and proficiency in English is considered an invaluable communication skill (McLaren & Hills, 1987). This study found that this was no exception for Bangladeshi graduates in Australian job markets.

Perceptions about the use of English language skills in the job market

One of the queries of this study was to explore the performance of Bangladeshi graduates in building careers in Australia with their levels of English. Among the participants, three were optimistic whereas an equal number of participants had pessimistic views with regard to their success. Urboshi, Azam and Mahmud argued that Bangladeshi graduates who worked in Australia were well versed in English and generally did well. The most fluent participant Urboshi, who scored 8 in IELTS (International English Language Testing System), and was working as an English teacher, argued that "Bangladeshi graduates are quite qualified and are doing well. At the beginning they struggle but at the end they do pretty well".

Both Azam and Mahmud held similar opinions. They argued that due to IELTS score requirements, Bangladeshi graduates come here with an acceptable standard of English anyway and therefore rarely did a Bangladeshi graduate fail to get a job solely due to their English. He added that some Bangladeshis are even working in "mainstream jobs" in Australia which required a higher level of English.

However, the other three participants expressed negative views. Hasabi, who obtained 7 as overall band in IELTS, argued that this varied from person to person. Graduates who studied in the general stream of education in Bangladesh did not see their English improve in their daily communication. He commented on his own language proficiency:

I have been living here for nine years, still now I cannot speak English fluently.
We have lack of confidence in speaking English which is not positive for job market. I think only 10% Bangladeshis are doing good jobs.

He also asserted that Bangladeshis were generally meritorious but language often worked as a barrier for them. If the person is a Bangladeshi graduate with some experience in good companies in Bangladesh, especially in a mobile or IT company, it is more likely for him or her to do better here in Australia.

Tonni, who was unemployed and seeking for a job, commented on the level of English quality among Bangladeshi graduates:

Some Bangladeshi graduates are good at reading and writing but weak in listening and speaking due to lack of practice. Here most of the jobs require excellent communication skills. The people who come to Australia for the first time face the problem of understanding words/accents of foreigners and Australian local language users. It is also a problem to talk to them due to lack of practice. Later it becomes easy gradually. Bangladeshi graduates, especially spouses are little bit lagged behind in communication skills as here competition is very high.

Sumi, who worked as a kitchen hand, honestly made self-assessment about her English and positioned herself in the Australian job market:

I myself feel it badly. I cannot understand language here properly. If I want to communicate with employers and customers, I have to understand them well. If I am not able to communicate with them properly, why will they give me job? I am lagged behind in comparison with my qualifications as my English is not good.

As discussed earlier, English is the dominant language of communication in a knowledge-based economy where workers, irrespective of business, industry and government, are increasingly expected to develop proficiency in English as communication skills. Hasabi and Tonni both were unanimous in their opinions that if someone graduated in Bangladesh and then did not do any course coming here in Australia, it was quite difficult for him/her to get a good job here. Hasabi explained: "I am a Bangladeshi graduate plus I have done courses here, then after a long time and long sufferings I have got a good job now. It took a long time indeed".

As noted in Table1, there was a wide range of proficiency levels in English among the participants; some were expert users while others were not completely able to communicate with people fluently and confidently. However, due to English language requirements, both students and immigrants who come to Australia have to have a better level of English language proficiency which usually secures better jobs.

Better English, better opportunities?

The spread of English has posed a "serious challenge" to non-English-speaking countries (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). To face this challenge people of non-native English countries like Bangladesh increasingly learn English for work purposes. As discussed, Dustmann and Fabbri (2003) and Tainer (1988) argue that proficiency in English plays an influential role in career opportunities with higher earnings. One of the aims of this article was to present the scenario of whether good English skills could bring better opportunities for Bangladeshi employees in the job market in Australia. Surprisingly, despite the varied levels of successes and levels of English proficiency, all participants believed better English yielded better employment. Hasabi stated that if he had better English and had greater job experience in a well-known company, he would have got a better job five years ago. He believed that lack of language fluency lagged him behind for five years. Similarly, two other participants contended that they would also have had more opportunities for better jobs. Rafiq explained:

When I was in Sydney I applied to Kmart and Coles for customer services and faced interview. I believe that if I were fluent in English, I would get the job.

Sumi similarly explained: "if I had better English, I would have been desperate to get a better job. I could express myself more properly. I have educational qualifications but I don't have quality English". Although Mahmud, Urboshi and Azam believed in "better English, better jobs", their perspectives were quite different. To explain his view Mahmud observed:

This is applicable in a non-English speaking country. But in an English speaking country like Australia, it can't really help. Because while a person in Australia as a student or immigrant, has a certain level of English. Rather in an English speaking country a person knows languages other than English like Chinese, Mandarin, Korean, German even Hindi etc can really help him in job markets. For example, when I go to a Chinese restaurant to ask for a job, they ask me whether I know Chinese or not. The same scenario is applicable in Indian restaurants or shops. Only certain jobs like customer services or call centres require fluency in English but not all.

Likewise, Azam also stated that despite his belief in better English helping get a better job, it was

not true for an old man like him, who was then 61 years of age, because age was an obstacle in getting a good job. Like Azam, Urboshi explained her position where she stated her own perspective for instance. She believed “it may applicable for others but not for me. I think the job I’m doing now is the best one for me. I am an English teacher at a university in an English speaking country - this is the best use of English”!

Comparison with graduates from other countries

In an unsolicited but spontaneous comparison of Bangladeshi graduates with immigrants and students from other countries, two participants brought up a new issue. Urboshi, who is a permanent resident in Australia and taught English to international students from many countries, observed that Bangladeshi graduates were doing much better than graduates from other Asian countries *because* of proficiency in English. She argued that Bangladeshi graduates were much more competent, fluent and impressive in speaking in English than graduates from some other Asian countries, especially Vietnam and China. She believed that such better skills in English of Bangladeshi graduates would ideally give them better opportunities in the job market.

However, this can often be otherwise. For example, Urboshi pointed out that she was aware that the Chinese managed good jobs even being rather poor in English, since the Chinese had a reputation of being really hard-working and had a large community network here in Australia. This meant they often faced less difficulty in getting jobs than people from other countries. Azam observed that:

Indian graduates are better in English proficiency than that of Bangladeshi graduates. But it varies from area to area in India. Due to better English they are playing an influential role in this job market.

Another participant, Tonni who was unemployed but was seeking a job, observed that as a consequence of unsatisfactory fluency in English, she lagged behind people from neighbouring countries of Bangladesh such as India and Sri Lanka. She thought that because she was from a remote area of Bangladesh where she was not serious in learning English, weak English made her face problems in getting jobs in the Australian market.

Although it begs further comparative study of English language proficiency and job performance of different nations in Australia, based on the perception of the participants of this study, it can be said that people from some Asian countries fare better in the Australian job markets than others due to other socio-cultural reasons stated above. Bangladeshi graduates who were not doing better than people from certain other Asian countries often attributed this to the fact that they did not have a large community like the Chinese in Australia.

Problems and discrimination in the Australian job market

It is argued that in recent times the English language policy has become a weapon of discrimination. Thornton and Luker’s (2010) study argued that “neoliberal employment strategies, immigration policies, economic globalisation and the events of 9/11 have created new environments for racism in Australia” (p. 1). English language difficulty is one of the important reasons for workplace discrimination (Ogbonna & Harris, 2006). This kind of discrimination exists particularly against Asian migrants (Syed & Murray, 2009). It is assumed that the present “hard” English language policy may intensify certain “racial biases” and discourage non-English background applicants for skilled visas (Berg, 2011).

Participants talked about how they viewed issues of discrimination in the Australian job market. All the employed participants reported that currently they did not face any such problems owing to English, even though, as mentioned, initially they all, except for Urboshi, faced some problems in handling jobs. From another angle, six participants, irrespective of their nature of jobs and employment status, spontaneously disclosed that they did not think that Bangladeshi employees

were facing any disadvantage or discrimination at work. Only one participant Hasabi, who had lived longer than most others in Australia and had a more varied job experience among the participants, gave a cautious hint of being discriminated against at work:

It is quite tough to understand. Yet, I believe it happens. I think our accent to them is horrible. But they love accent of European non-native English users. Its reason is unknown to me. But one reason may be our color is black and their color is white. That is why non-native European English speakers get privileges.

In addition, Rafiq, who was employed in a cleaning job, explained that he was “compelled” to do this sort of job (cleaning) in Australia but argued that in the Australian job market students did not get as much advantage as (permanent) residents usually get. His academic qualification was not considered in his present work because of the nature of the job. Some researchers have pointed out that employment criteria varied from job to job where educational qualifications may not have been the main benchmark for selection (Ho & Alcorso, 2004). As Rafiq’s formal education was not counted, he felt that his qualifications were not being essentially accounted duly. Some studies have confirmed this and demonstrated that educational qualifications obtained by immigrants in their home country, especially in developing countries were not considered as equal to those achieved in Australia (Brooks, 1996; Syed & Murray, 2009).

Rather than being discriminated, all employed participants expressed satisfaction with their present jobs, irrespective of the nature of their professions. In explaining the reasons for their job satisfaction, Hasabi and Urboshi, who were both permanent residents and had initially struggled with jobs in Australia, opined that they got jobs related to their study as expected. Two other participants, Rafiq and Sumi who were working as cleaning and kitchen hands respectively, stated that they were satisfied with their present jobs since they did not have alternative options.

It can be generally said that Australia encourages and promotes racial harmony based on its policy of multiculturalism and being a cosmopolitan and culturally diverse country, it endeavours to maintain impartiality in general and in the job market in particular. Yet, it appears that it is quite difficult to ensure complete indiscriminate due to some of the socio-cultural reasons stated above.

Conclusion

Language indeed is an essential capital and English, as the language of globalisation, is the most important linguistic capital in today’s world where sound skills in English work as a vehicle to sound opportunities and economic benefits in career track, not only in Australia but also over the world. On the contrary, because Australia is a multicultural country where different communities work and live, even if English were considered as the language of globalisation, other languages can play an equally important role in employment as we have seen in the discussion above.

While proficiency in English is an important factor in career trajectory in an English speaking country like Australia, this study did not consider others factors such as age, educational qualifications, gender, training, individual attributes and visa categories in employment curve. This study was conducted only within Victoria rather than other states in Australia. In addition, this study only looked at a narrow range of job areas such as teaching, technology support, customer service, kitchen hand and cleaning, not others service sectors.

Albeit the limited scope, in terms of demography, this paper has explored the hitherto unstudied relationship between English language proficiency and the employment and success of a group of Bangladeshi graduates in Australia. It was found that in various ways one’s English language skills did influence their prospects of employment. As well as contributing to the possibility of secure and “better” jobs, English undoubtedly played a role in social interaction and in the building of social networks – the latter also an active determinant in enhancing job prospects among migrant communities. It is hoped that the findings of this study will prompt further research among other

migrant nationalities in Australia and other countries and will inform educational policy planners, teacher educators, teachers, employers and career advisers to identify appropriate English language learning programs for migrants that support increased employability, and thus empowerment, through English.

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Appendix

Interview schedule

1. Could you please give your introduction including your education background?
2. What did you do before coming to Australia?
3. Are you doing any job in Australia? If yes, what is it?
4. Could you please talk about your job history in Australia?
5. What is your perception about Australian job market?
6. What do you think about the role of English language in Australian job market?
7. How are Bangladeshi graduates doing in Australian Job market with their English language skills?
8. If you had better English, would you have better job?
9. How are Bangladeshi graduates doing in Australian job market in comparison with graduates from other countries?
10. Do you face any problem and discrimination or disadvantage in present jobs due to English language?