

Blog 2 – CAPI IYIP – Tasneem Bhaidu

The Power of English

In this blog, I will reflect on my realizations of how important the English language is in our colonized world. I will also discuss the difficulties I have seen the founders of my host organization face in governance, in terms of funds distribution. Coming into this internship, I did not expect the English language to hold so much power and importance that it has proven to in Bangladesh. I thought I would have a difficult time in Bangladesh, being a non-Bangla speaker. Yes, it has been difficult. But, staff from my host organization, Bangladeshi Ovibashi Mohila Sramik Association (BOMSA), are also experiencing difficulties doing work in their field being non-English speakers. English holds a significant amount of power that allows for a level of opportunities that the two co-founders of BOMSA feel they are deprived of.

Before arriving to Bangladesh, one of my biggest goals was to learn Bangla. I wanted to challenge myself by enhancing my skillset and learning a new language. I was so excited to be able to come out of the internship with some ability to speak Bangla, and to show off my Bangla to friends and family back home.

A week after arriving to Dhaka, Zahura (my roommate and co-intern) and I finally met the staff at BOMSA. While two out of the five staff could speak English very well, the two founders had a limited ability to speak in English. They flagged this as a barrier for them in their field. We were told that a large part of our jobs at BOMSA would be helping the two founders learn English. These two women, although they are the founders, often feel limited to what they can do in their work, as they cannot attend national and international level meetings or capacity building trainings in English. They expressed that they feel restricted to only working front line with their service users. In addition to working front line with migrant workers and families, they wanted to contribute to the bigger cause through advocacy and higher level work. As intelligent and passionate as they are, these women feel they can not give their all without the ability to speak and understand English.

After hearing about their strong desire to learn English, but not being able to have the funding for a proper English teacher, we took on the opportunity/challenge to teach them English as best as we can. Although we were not trained in teaching, we thought however much English we could teach them would be beneficial. It has been almost 2 months since we landed in Dhaka. Zahura and I have been giving the founders English lessons frequently. It has been quite the challenge for us as we do not feel qualified to be teaching, but we have seen a growing confidence in the founders in speaking English. One of them even attended a conference in Brazil, and came back to tell us she was able to use what she had learned from our lessons to converse with others. Seeing the increased confidence and hearing this feedback was very rewarding for us.

Since we began giving the founders English lessons, I have been reflecting on a few things. First, the founders' desire to learn English from us was much greater and vital than my desire to learn Bangla from them. I came into the internship with the goal of learning some Bangla. After finding out how important it was for the founders to learn English, my perspective changed. I was not so obsessed with the idea of learning Bangla anymore. I realized that learning Bangla was not as beneficial as the founders learning English.

Another issue that I thought about a lot was that how much power the English language has, even in Bangladesh, where most people speak only Bangla. I wrote down in my journal, "English can be a source of opportunity or a barrier to success, depending on your ability to speak it or not." The two founders of BOMSA are returnee migrant workers, with vast experience and knowledge about women migrant workers' issues. They have been doing this work for years and have built their organization from the ground up. They have lived experience as migrant workers. Although they do not have formal education, these women are experts in the field. Unfortunately, due to their lack of formal education and English, they lack the confidence and capacity to work in international and national level advocacy. They expressed that they are unable to further their skills and knowledge through trainings available for community workers because many times, the trainings are held in English. They expressed that they miss out on many opportunities, which their English-speaking colleagues have access to. Although these women have a tremendous amount of knowledge and experience in their field, they feel the English language still holds this power over them. Without English, they almost feel powerless.

It's unfortunate that these women have so much knowledge and experience, but can not contribute fully to the work they are doing because of English. The power of English in this colonial world is so great, that even in Bangladesh where the majority do not speak English, it has become a hindrance for these women. English has become a necessity for them, if they want to move forward in their field. I can't help but think how many other individuals there are in Bangladesh and other countries doing such important work in civil society but feeling inadequate and unaccomplished due to not being able to speak English.

I feel the mediocre lessons we are providing to our co-founders are not adequate in improving their English. As untrained teachers, we can only go so far in helping them. Our efforts are not going to waste, but I feel these women deserve proper English lessons which will bring better results. Being co-founders of such an important NGO, I feel these women should have access to proper English lessons. It is unfortunate that although they have flagged English lessons as being a core need to enhance their work, they are unable to find the funding for a licensed English teacher. As a grassroots NGO, funding is inevitably an issue. It seems that English lessons cannot be prioritized at this moment. Funding is so precarious that even existing as an organization is an uncertainty. As the co-founders, they are governing the NGO and making the decisions of where funding goes. These women are the governing bodies of BOMSA, making authoritative decisions, yet they feel they cannot put funding towards English lessons, which they need/want.

With four months left of our internship, the best we can do is to continue English lessons with our co-founders. Although I feel it is not sufficient for them, I think it is better than nothing. If we can contribute something of value to the organization, and English lessons is what they want, then we will do just that. While doing this, we will continue to encourage them to practice English and strive to learn in their personal time too. This way, hopefully, they can get a good grasp of basic English and move their way up to a more advanced level. Also, I want to continue reinforcing to them that just because they cannot speak English, does not mean they are less intelligent or inferior to their English-speaking colleagues. I have sensed this feeling from them. So, as we continue giving our co-founders English lessons, I hope it can enhance their work and empower them too.