

# **BANGLADESH IS MY MOTHERLAND**



Paul Minyo

**A case study of  
Bengali and English language  
development and use  
among a group of Bengali pupils  
in Britain**

**by Rachel Warner**

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

Many thanks to:

- Achhiya, Ambia, Asma, Bilkiss, Fatima, Hajira, Parveen, Razna, Roshonara, Shahida and Shajanara for sharing their thoughts and experiences with me.
- Achhiya, Afruza, Asma, Nurzan, Rahima, Razna, Roshonara and Shamsun for agreeing to be photographed.
- All the Bengali pupils I have taught, who first led me to an interest in Bangladesh—particularly Nita, Taz Uddin and Shibley.
- The staff at the case-study school, especially the head of the ESL department.
- Josie Levine at the Institute of Education.
- Omar Alghali and Reuben Alghali for their support.
- Stella Chapman, Betty Hunter, Dave Lawrence, Sibani Raychaudhury and Roger West for their comments.
- The staff at the Minority Rights Group.
- The City Parochial Foundation and the London Boroughs Grants Unit for financial assistance.



The Minority Rights Group was founded in the 1960s. Its principal aim is to secure justice for minority (and non-dominant majority) groups suffering discrimination by:

- Researching, publishing and distributing the facts as widely as possible to raise public knowledge and awareness of minority issues worldwide;
- Advocating and publicising all aspects of the human rights of minorities to draw attention to violations and to aid the prevention of dangerous and destructive conflicts;
- Educating, through its research, publications and schools' programme, on issues relating to prejudice, discrimination and group conflicts.

---

## SUGGESTED USES FOR *BANGLADESH IS MY MOTHERLAND*

---

This paper will be valuable background for all those teachers working with bilingual students and especially for teachers of English as a Second Language, English, and Community Languages, at both school and adult education level. Although the case study focuses on Bengali pupils, making it of particular interest to those working with the Bengali community in Britain or interested in Bangladesh, most of the issues raised apply equally to other bilinguals. The paper is unusual in that it uses students' own descriptions and thoughts about the experience of being a bilingual learner. The section on INSET makes the paper a valuable resource for all those providing training on bilingual issues. It provides ample evidence of the statement in the Cox Report on English for ages 5 to 16 (1989) that 'bilingual children offer opportunities to explore such themes [i.e. knowledge about language] in a novel context'. It will also be of interest to academics concerned with bilingualism and those concerned with living in a multicultural society, linguistic human rights and the education rights of minorities.

(N.B. In the course of this paper the term 'bilingual' is used to refer to all pupils who have access to or need to use two languages at home and at school. It does not imply fluency in either language and includes pupils just beginning to learn English.)

Rachel Warner has a degree in Psychology and a Diploma in Education (Language in Education in a Multicultural Society). She has visited Bangladesh twice, in 1984 and 1989. In 1989 she received a fellowship from the National Children's Bureau to spend two months researching primary education in Bangladesh. She has taught English in India, and English as a Second Language to bilingual students in secondary schools in Leicester and High Wycombe. She was Head of the ESL Department of an inner London comprehensive school before becoming MRG's Education Officer in February 1990. She is the author of seven multicultural books for young children, a report on primary education in Bangladesh and articles about Bangladesh and bilingual pupils.

---

# CONTENTS

---

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
1	The school
1	The class
1	Methodology
1	Aim of the research
<hr/>	
<b>2</b>	<b>The Year 11 pupils who were interviewed</b>
<hr/>	
<b>2</b>	<b>Code-switching</b>
<hr/>	
<b>4</b>	<b>Bengali learning histories</b>
<hr/>	
<b>4</b>	<b>Learning and developing English</b>
7	The school's response to developing pupils' English skills
<hr/>	
<b>8</b>	<b>Learning and developing Bengali at the school</b>
8	Provision at the school
9	Sylheti versus Bengali
9	Pupils' attitudes to Bengali
10	Teachers' attitudes to Bengali
<hr/>	
<b>11</b>	<b>Language maintenance, shift and loss</b>
<hr/>	
<b>12</b>	<b>Linguistic human rights?</b>
<hr/>	
<b>14</b>	<b>Conclusions and implications for practice</b>
<hr/>	
<b>15</b>	<b>Suggestions for INSET activities</b>
<hr/>	
<b>18</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>
<hr/>	
<b>19</b>	<b>Appendix A</b>
	English language acquisition stages
<hr/>	
<b>19</b>	<b>Appendix B</b>
	Transcript of conversation with Fatima, Shahida, Bilkiss and Parveen
<hr/>	
<b>28</b>	<b>Appendix C</b>
	Samples of pupils' writing

---

© Minority Rights Group

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-946690-96-0

The section 'Suggestions for INSET activities' may be reproduced for non-commercial educational use, but no other part of the book may be reproduced without the prior permission of the Minority Rights Group.

Published July 1992.

Typeset by The Richmond Publishing Co. Ltd  
Printed in the United Kingdom





---

# INTRODUCTION

---

This paper is based on a term's research undertaken for a Diploma in Education (with Special Reference to the Role of Language in Education). I spent a term at a comprehensive school, working with Year 11 Bengali pupils (i.e. 15- to 16-year-olds) and interviewing groups of them about their use of Bengali and English.

---

## The school

---

The pupils attended an inner city school in a predominantly Bangladeshi community. The catchment area of the school has poor housing and high rates of unemployment, and is generally disadvantaged.

At the school 94 per cent of the pupils were bilingual and 86 per cent spoke Bengali — or rather the Sylheti dialect of Bengali. Among the other languages spoken at the school, 3 per cent of pupils spoke Punjabi, 2 per cent spoke Urdu and 1 per cent spoke Gujarati. Of the 940 Bengali speakers, the vast majority (75 per cent) were Stage 2 and Stage 3 speakers of English. (See Appendix A for a definition of English Acquisition Stages.)

Pupils at the school are taught in mixed-ability classes, supported by members of the English as a Second Language and Special Needs departments.

The school is a popular one and is oversubscribed. It has a good academic record; in 1990 43 per cent of pupils achieved one to four GCSEs grades A to C, and 16 per cent achieved five or more GCSEs grades A to C. Of 157 pupils entered for English GCSE, 31 per cent achieved Grade C or above. Of 106 pupils entered for Bengali GCSE, 91 per cent achieved Grade C or above and 54 per cent achieved Grade A.

---

## The class

---

The Year 11 class I worked with consisted of 23 pupils, all of whom were Bengali speakers. There were no pupils in the class at Stage 1 of learning English — the majority were at Stage 3 and 4 with a few Stage 2 learners.

---

## Methodology

---

The fieldwork was undertaken in the tradition of action research — 'i.e. in the mode of anthropologists living among their subjects' (Josie Levine, 1989). I was a participant observer at the school. I was a participant because I worked regularly with one Year 11 class (I had a timetable and supported them in lessons one morning a week), and an observer because

although I was part of the class I was also an outsider. I didn't have the responsibilities that I had had as the head of an ESL department and I had much more opportunity to reflect on and analyse what was going on in the classroom.

When I had built up a relationship with the pupils through working with the class, I took groups or pairs of pupils out of the classroom to interview. These conversations were then transcribed and are quoted from throughout the paper. One complete interview forms Appendix B.

---

## Aim of the research

---

I was interested in learning about pupils' feelings about Bengali and English, their history of learning both Bengali and English, how they had developed their English in a predominantly Bengali-speaking environment, how they had maintained and developed their Bengali and to what extent a switch to English was occurring. I was also interested in the school's response to the pupils' bilingualism in such a relatively homogeneous situation, and the pupils' perception of the school's response. I was trying to explore the experience of being a Bengali-speaking bilingual learner at the school, through pupils' *own* words and descriptions, and trying to be careful not to generalise from what they said.

I also wanted to look at the experience of being a bilingual learner in Britain in the context of the demand for linguistic human rights for minorities.



Paul Mimyo

*'You can't explain a Bengali event properly when you're using English.'*

---

## THE YEAR-11 PUPILS WHO WERE INTERVIEWED

---

RAZNA — came to Britain at the age of six, is literate in Bengali and plans to do A-levels in the sixth form. She is interested in accountancy. Assessed as being at Stage 4 in English.

ROSHONARA — came to Britain at the age of nine, is literate in Bengali and plans to do A-levels in the sixth form. She is interested in law. Stage 4 English.

PARVEEN — came to Britain at the age of eight, is literate in Bengali and wants to go to college. Stage 3 English.

BILKISS — came to Britain at the age of four, is literate in Bengali and wants to go to college. Stage 4 English.

SHAHIDA — was born in Britain, isn't literate in Bengali and wants to go to college. Stage 4 English.

FATIMA — was born in Britain but went to Bangladesh when she was five and stayed until she was 11. She reached Class 5 in Bangladesh but did not go to primary school in Britain. Stage 3 English.

AMBIA — came to Britain at the age of 14, got up to Class 7 in Bangladesh, is literate in Bengali and wants to do or retake GCSEs in the sixth form. Stage 2 English.

HAJIRA — came to Britain at the age of six, is literate in Bengali and wants to do A-levels in the sixth form. Stage 3 English.

SHAJANARA — came to Britain at the age of 11, is literate in Bengali, wants to go into the sixth form. Stage 2 English.

ASMA — came to Britain at the age of two, then went back to Bangladesh until she was ten; literate in Bengali. She wants to do A-levels in the sixth form, and is interested in banking. Stage 3 English.

ACHHIYA — came to Britain as a baby, then went back to Bangladesh, returned to Britain when she was four; literate in Bengali. She may stay on in the sixth form, depending on her GCSE grades. Stage 3 English.

(N.B. Class 5 in Bangladesh is the last class of primary school. Pupils in Bangladesh proceed to the next class only if they pass their end-of-year examinations.)

---

## CODE-SWITCHING

---

Code-switching is 'the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems' (Urmi Chana and Suzanne Romaine, 1984, quoting Gumperz). According to Appel and Muysken (1987), only bilingual speakers who are fluent in both languages will be able to code-switch: 'only those speakers who have learnt both languages at an early age will reach the level of proficiency necessary to be able to use two languages in one single sentence'.

This is borne out at the case-study school by the experience of the head of the ESL department, who said that it was only relatively recently that she had noticed pupils code-switching. She said, 'There's always been such a huge disparity between the two languages. Apart from a few phrases they haven't really had the fluidity [in English] until recent years for fluent code-switching...I think in order to effectively code-switch you have to be fluent in both languages and I don't think until recently we've had pupils like that.' Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) say 'the rapidity and automaticity with which the alternations take place often give the impression that the speaker lacks control of the structural systems of the two languages and is mixing them indiscriminately. However, quite the contrary is true. Code-switching is most often engaged in by those bilingual speakers who are the most proficient in both their languages.'

I certainly observed pupils code-switching in lessons as they talked to each other. As a non-Bengali speaker I was unable to analyse their code-switching and see exactly the uses to which each language was put. Appel and Muysken (1987) say that switching serves a referential function because 'it often involves lack of knowledge of one language or lack of facility in that language on a certain subject. Certain subjects may be more appropriately discussed in one language.' They say that topic-related switching is the one bilingual speakers are most conscious of, and this was borne out by my conversations with the class.

Bilkiss said, 'There are some meanings you can't explain in Bengali. If you are talking about an event that happened in school and it concerned a lot of English speaking, you wouldn't explain it in Bengali; it's difficult and it's the same the other way round. If something happened at home and you want to explain it to your friends, if you speak in English it's sort of difficult. You can't explain a Bengali event properly when you're using English.' Similarly, Roshonara said, 'Sometimes it's easier to speak in Bengali at times when we're talking about home things.' And later:

R.W. But when would you use Bengali?  
 Roshonara **I think when we can't describe something in English.**  
 R.W. So what kind of things can't you describe in English?  
 Roshonara **Some feelings.**  
 R.W. Feelings about what?  
 Roshonara **Family. Sometimes when we have family problems.**

Razna said, 'Sometimes it's easier to speak in Bengali at times when we're talking about home sometimes...It's just that feeling, it comes in, Bengali comes in.'

In addition to switching to Bengali if pupils are talking about home events, which have presumably taken place in Bengali in the first place, the girls were also aware of switching to the language that a particular topic had been learnt in — usually English. Razna talked about helping girls who knew little English in maths lessons:

Razna **In maths I used to help them out and using numbers in Bengali. I never use numbers in Bengali so it was hard. I kept saying 'this plus that' and she probably didn't know what 'plus' is and everything.**  
 R.W. So you said it in English even though you knew she didn't know English, because it came out in English?  
 Razna **It just came out.**  
 Roshonara **I don't think so she'd understand 'plus'. It just comes in, you can't avoid it.**

Conversely, someone who had learnt certain things in Bengali tended to associate Bengali with those concepts and would presumably be more likely to switch to Bengali when talking about them. For example:

Asma **But some of the sums I think about in Bengali because I've learnt the sums in Bangladesh. The timetables as well, some of them.**  
 R.W. So you associate it with something you did when you were young?  
 Asma **Yes, it's going to be easier for me if I think about it in Bengali then I can get the answer. If I think about it in English I haven't learnt any timetables in English, it's going to be harder for me to get it.**

Another function of code-switching is a directive function (Appel and Muysken, 1987) in that switching to the other language 'includes a person more by using her or his language'. Several of the girls I talked to commented on this:

Hajira **With friends like Ambia, Shajanara, they don't understand all the English words so we have to use Bengali.**

And:

Achhiya **Like you want to explain someone you use both languages, half Bengali and half English. That's what we do at home and even in the school sometimes.**

Asma **Yes, that's true.**

Achhiya **We think it's much more easier if we change our language to different one 'cos if we talk something in English and we want to explain to that person and she doesn't understand. Or maybe she does but we still want to explain her more. We want to talk about something very interesting we have to talk in Bengali again and change it over.**

Razna rather vividly described her code-switching as 'cracking'. She said, 'I sort of think, "Oh I speak in Sylheti with her" and then afterwards it just cracks — I speak English.' Grosjean (1982) talks about the negative attitudes towards code-switching which many monolinguals have, referring, for example, to a mixture of French and English as 'Franglais', and says that bilinguals often adopt this negative attitude towards code-switching themselves. Razna demonstrated this when she said, 'When I was in Bangladesh they [i.e. her relatives] thought — was I speaking English or Bengali? 'Cos three languages [i.e. Bengali, Sylheti and English] mixed together, it's awful!'

Another feature of code-switching which Grosjean highlights is 'the most available word'. She says 'a bilingual knows a word in both language X and language Y, but the language Y word is more available at that moment when speaking language X. He or she may switch to language Y to say the word.' Razna and Roshonara exemplified this in the following exchange:

R.W. Might you be halfway through a sentence in English and then say something in Bengali?  
 Razna **Yes, we normally do that! We talk in Bengali first and then halfway through English comes along and that's the dominant thing...**  
 R.W. Do you know why?  
 Roshonara **I don't know.**  
 R.W. Would it be that the word just comes into your head?  
 Roshonara **Yes, that must be it, sometimes it doesn't come.**  
 Razna **Human beings tend to take the short cut all the time. I think that's it. The first word that comes into our mind, we just grab it. (My emphasis.)**

---

## BENGALI LEARNING HISTORIES

---

Of the 11 pupils I interviewed, all but one, Shahida — who had been born in Britain — were literate in Standard Bengali. All spoke Sylheti — the dialect of the region of Bangladesh, Sylhet, which they and their families originated from (although they often refer to Sylheti as Bengali in their conversations). How had these girls achieved literacy in Bengali?

One, Ambia, had got up to Class 7 in Bangladesh, and according to her friends was very good at Bengali. In my earlier work in Bangladesh I had discovered that it was necessary for pupils to reach Class 5 (the end of primary school) in order to achieve lasting literacy in Bengali (Warner, R., 1989). Certainly Ambia's written work in Bengali looked highly competent (see Appendix C).

Another girl, Fatima, went back to Bangladesh when she was five to study Bengali and stayed until she was 11. She got up to Class 5. She said:

**Fatima** My mum and dad they took us to Bangladesh to learn Bengali a bit more and they left us there. They came back to this country with my little brother to make his passport British and then they went to Bangladesh and then they came back to this country.

**R.W.** Did they bring you back when they thought you'd learnt enough Bengali?

**Fatima** Yes.

Achhiya said that she learnt a lot in an eight-week holiday to Bangladesh: 'Because one of my cousin brothers, he, every night, in one of the empty huts no one lives there, we used to go there and he used to teach us everything.'

Most of the other pupils had learnt their Bengali by going to Bengali classes or being taught at home or both, in addition to studying Bengali as a subject on the timetable at school, which I shall return to later. Parveen, for example, said, 'I knew Bengali because my mum taught me'. Razna said, 'I went to Bengali school in this country for two years...down in Bernard Street near our house...I read Book 1 and Book 2, and then in the middle I stopped, then I went back to Book 3.' Then — 'afterwards I just read books at home. My sister she reads books and then she told me to read some of it and she used to test me to see if I was all right.' Achhiya said, 'When I was small and used to live in our old building, there was this teacher called Nurul Haq and he was a really nice

teacher. His wife as well, they both used to teach us Arabic and Bengali...I learnt reading Bengali. Before I didn't know nothing, like the alphabet.'



Paul Minyo

*'I think I should learn Bengali because it's my mother language.'*

---

## LEARNING AND DEVELOPING ENGLISH

---

Most of the pupils I interviewed had started to learn English in primary school when they arrived from Bangladesh. Roshonara described this process:

'When I came to this country I didn't like it at first. I went to a primary school and I didn't like it because most of the time they'd speak in English and I didn't understand. There were some Bengali girls. But when they didn't want me to understand they'd talk in English and I'd feel isolated and lonely... Sometimes they made jokes, they wouldn't really say what the teachers were saying. I felt really left out. I found the language a bit hard because I came to this country when I was nine it was hard for me to adjust. If I'd come at an earlier age I'd have adjusted a bit easily. But still you know it was all right.'

Razna highlighted the importance of people giving the impression of understanding what you're trying to communicate:

**Razna** My next-door neighbour she was really helpful. Although I couldn't speak English I spoke Bengali to her and she pretended she understood me.



R.W. She was English?  
**Razna** Yes, and we played games. It was quite helpful because if you have a white kid who is your friend then you have to speak English to her and she has to speak English that I can understand. So I soon adjusted.

I was interested in what incentive there was to learn English when older girls arrived knowing no English and then spent their time in the predominantly Bengali-speaking environment of the school. Ambia, who arrived in the third year straight from Bangladesh, felt (via Hajira translating for her) that 'she has to learn English otherwise she can't do a job or anything'. I asked Bilkiss whether most of the pupils who arrived wanted to learn English:

**Bilkiss** I think so.  
 ? They're eager.  
 R.W. They don't just think, 'I can speak Bengali, it doesn't matter'? (*laughter*)  
**Bilkiss** I think they realise they have to learn English.  
 R.W. What makes them realise that?  
**Bilkiss** Things like going to the shop, if someone says something in English and they'll say I don't want to be ashamed like that if I go to another shop.  
 ? Self-respect.

Shahida said, 'They want to get around in a foreign country. When they come they can only speak Bengali but if they were walking about and met a lot of English people they wouldn't know what to say so it'd be good for that person to learn English.'

However, Bilkiss also said she thought it was harder for newly arrived pupils to learn English now that the school was predominantly Bengali. She said, 'If newcomers come now it'd be difficult because everyone's speaking Bengali, they wouldn't hear much English. It'd be difficult for them to learn English.' Razna also said, 'Most of us are Bengali so they [i.e. newly arrived pupils] speak Bengali with us. They only speak English with the teachers and that's not much — so if they had a few more English kids in lesson times they could talk to them.'

I wondered whether the pupils I interviewed who had arrived at secondary school speaking English also felt that being in a school with 94 per cent bilingual pupils had held back the development of their skills in English. Most felt that they would have learnt more English in a more English-speaking environment. For example, Bilkiss and Shahida said:

**Shahida** Our primary school didn't only have Bengalis.  
**Bilkiss** We went to the same school you see.  
**Shahida** Maybe that's why we can speak English a bit better than others because we had English surrounding us.

Fatima said, 'I think it would have made a difference because if you go to a school where lots of pupils are English and you talk English all the time except when you go back home and talk Bengali to your mum...'

Razna felt that 'we should have a bit more white kids here. It's 98 per cent Bengali.' Roshonara said, 'I think that it'd be better. We're going to grow up and have to work in a mixture, in a society.'

Asma and Achhiya felt the same:

R.W. If you were in a school with many more English-speaking pupils do you think you'd have learnt more English from listening to them?  
**Asma** Yes, I think so.  
**Achhiya** Yes, right from the beginning I think.  
**Asma** There's much Bengali girls so most of the time we talk in Bengali. Just to talk to the teachers or English girls we talk in English.  
**Achhiya** As long as if our religion doesn't change like if we forget our language it wouldn't be fair, it's all right if we stay with English girls more and learn more.  
**Asma** I think this class should have been mixed, half English girls and half Bengali girls...  
 R.W. So you think it's a bit of a problem that it's mainly Bengali?  
 ? Our class girls are all the same.  
 R.W. But on one hand you're saying it's good for developing Bengali and on the other hand you're saying it's a problem there aren't more English speakers around?  
**Asma** Yes.  
 R.W. But you can't have both really.  
**Asma** I think most of the time we should have English in this country because most of the time people use English in this country.

Although the pupils perceived the lack of native English speakers as a problem, their English had still reached a reasonably high standard (see, for example, some of their written work in Appendix C). They cited various factors in the development of their English at school.



Firstly, teachers obviously assume a huge significance in a school where for some pupils the teachers may be the only native English speakers they encounter in a typical day. Razna said, 'I've learnt most of my English from teachers so like you might say for us to live in East London we should pick up an East London accent, but it's just that we don't go out often and we don't mix with other people so the accent we learn is pure from the teachers, so that's the accent.' The head of ESL also commented on the fact that pupils at the school spoke English with middle-class accents as opposed to cockney accents because of the influence of teachers on pupils' speech. Some pupils said they learnt new words from teachers and gave a very specific example:

- R.W.           What about hearing new words? Where does that come from? Teachers?
- All               **Yes, mainly.**
- Fatima         **And if I don't understand I ask the teachers.**
- Bilkiss         **And the head, she uses really sophisticated, really long words.**
- Shahida       **And then after the assembly she tells us you've learnt a new word, remember it.**

Secondly, some pupils said they learnt more English from other pupils. For example:

- Razna           **I've learnt a lot from her and she's learnt a lot from me... 'cos I sometimes take her example when I'm talking to other people.**
- Roshonara     **I do the same.**

Shahida also cited her sister as someone she learnt more English from. She said, 'My sister tries to increase my vocabulary. She says you're getting older, you shouldn't use words like that, use more sophisticated words...she gets me books, thick ones, novels and if I don't understand she tells me the meaning so I kind of learn from my sister.'

Thirdly, the pupils I talked to saw reading as an important factor in developing their English:

- R.W.           How does your English develop, though? What makes it get to a better level? How do you learn new words for example?
- All               **Books!**
- Bilkiss         **Mainly books. One of my main hobbies is reading. I just love reading, from when I was really young in primary school. I used to get loads of books from libraries...**
- Fatima         **Sometimes I read books and I don't understand some of the words so I look them up in the dictionary and write them down.**

Part of the English Department policy is to have 'book box' lessons once a week in English lessons all through the school:

- Achhiya       **We have book box lessons and we read in class silently. I wish we had more.**
- Asma           **We go to the library too.**

Clearly, for Asma, having books read aloud to her in English lessons was important, especially as she finds sustained reading of demanding books difficult:

- Asma           **I don't like reading those thick books...I think I might forget them. If I read it with the class and the teacher reads it, it's really interesting.**
- R.W.           Like *The Pearl*?
- Asma           **Yes, but I don't like to read it myself.**
- R.W.           Not after you've had it read to you?
- Asma           **Yes, *The Pearl* because I've had interest in it so I would like to read it again by myself. But not the book that hasn't been read by somebody to me. I don't like to read thick books. Some other girls read such thick books!**

Reading has played an important part in the continuing development of Razna's English. Her reading history is impressive:

'When I first started this school I used to read Enid Blyton and Roald Dahl. I used to find them very exciting. And then afterwards I got interested in teenage romance, and then I thought they were influencing me at times and then I thought, no. When I used to write my work, some of that used to come in. My teacher said that's not really good English to use in writing and then gave me those women writers, and I found them quite interesting, like Betsy Brown and *The Color Purple* and then after that I went into bigger novels like Thomas Hardy and *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* was my first real novel to read and then I got interested in Thomas Hardy so I'm still continuing reading those.'

Incidentally, despite this facility in reading English it is interesting that both Razna and Roshonara feel more emotional identity with books they read in Bengali than ones they read in English, even though they find it harder to read the Bengali:

- R.W.           If it's a bit of a struggle, do you enjoy it? [i.e. reading Bengali]
- Razna           **Yes, it's different from the English books I read. Bengali books are very emotional and so sad it makes you cry too, where with**

**English books you read it and it's really nice but...**

- Roshonara** It actually doesn't touch the realities of life.
- Razna** It's not all that strong as Bengali books. It's different. When you read a Bengali book you say 'Yes, that's me' but with an English book you will sometimes say 'Yes, it's me' but that's just them.
- R.W.** Do you feel it's about other people, not about you?
- Razna** Yes, but at times it links. Some of my life is what an English person's life is. It's actually confusing when you're reading two different books.

Another influence on developing pupils' English further comes from watching TV at home. Razna cited 'dictionaries and teachers and TV' as the source of new vocabulary. However, it is worth remembering, as the head of ESL pointed out, that although pupils do watch TV at home, a lot of time in front of the television is also spent watching Hindi movies on the video.

---

## **The school's response to developing pupils' English skills**

---

The head of ESL felt that pupils at the school are in a Bengali immersion situation where they spend roughly 70 to 80 per cent of their day using Bengali. Apart from direct interaction with teachers in English and the few non-Bengali speakers, she felt that pupils mainly use Bengali in the playground, in the corridor and in group work in class. Although she felt there are many positive aspects to this use of Bengali, to which I shall return, she also felt it has implications for the development of pupils' English. Pupils are not exposed to an English-speaking peer group. Their oral English is only almost as good as the person they are interacting with, who is likely to be a second language learner too. She felt pupils can only get to a certain level orally, a plateau, in this predominantly Bengali-speaking environment.

Obviously the demographic structure of the school cannot be changed in any natural way to provide more native English speakers to help develop pupils' oral skills in English. However, the head of ESL felt that the school should aim to develop pupils' *passive* knowledge of English, by getting them to listen to as much English as possible and handle English texts with confidence. She felt that working hard on literacy was important. She thinks that if pupils' passive knowledge of English is there, when they go out into the 'real world' and mix with native speakers of English their oral competence should quickly catch up, as they practise what they've learnt. She said that as part of this process, work in class could lead to conclusions that need to be in

English — for example, a presentation to the class and teacher in English or a display in English. In this way pupils would discuss work in Bengali if they are working in a group made up entirely of Bengali speakers, but could see the reason for using English as part of their work.

A concern with reading and writing has informed the Language and Learning Policy working group at the school. In fact one of the first activities of the working group several years ago was to analyse all the writing done by a first year class which seemed to show that less writing was going on at the school than such surveys show in other schools. The Cross-Curricular Coordinator for Language in the school felt that staff may have avoided doing sustained writing with so many second language learners in their classes, but it is lengthy pieces of writing that are so often required for GCSE coursework. The draft Language and Learning Policy says, 'Questions and answers, gap-filling, tick charts, although useful, demand little writing. In order to encourage high quality lengthy pieces, the students must be encouraged to write for a purpose. Different audiences can be found. Examples of this are letters, display, writing for other students for whom the information may be of real value, writing for themselves, as in diaries.'

On reading, the Policy says, 'Like writing there are different kinds of reading for different purposes, that have to be recognised and taught: reading for pleasure, including literature; reading for information;... reading instructions, such as worksheets.' However, an Inspectors' Report on Language across the Curriculum at the school (August 1990) cautions: 'Because pupils find text books difficult to read, teachers may tend to simplify texts or find other ways of giving information. As a result pupils may not get the necessary practice in understanding how non-fiction and informative texts work, or in learning the "language" of subject text books, and therefore continue to have difficulty in improving their reading skills.'

Other issues addressed by the draft Language Policy are: stressing that bilingual learners at an early stage of learning English should stay in the mainstream classroom as much as possible so that 'the responsibility for all learners, at all stages of English development lies with departments', stressing the importance of talk in learning, the need for students to work collaboratively in groups, and the fact that 'supporting the development of the first language will enhance the learning of the second'. At the time I was at the school, the draft Language Policy was being discussed in departments and had not been formally adopted by the school.

---

# LEARNING AND DEVELOPING BENGALI AT THE SCHOOL

---

## Provision at the school

---

Pupils in the lower school chose to do either Bengali or classical studies (i.e. Greek and Roman civilisation) for two periods (out of a 30 period week). In the upper school pupils can choose to do Bengali GCSE as an option. In the sixth form, both A-level Bengali and the GCSE are offered.

Feelings about the provision of Bengali at the school varied. Shahida said, 'They're offering us a subject, that's a lot they're doing because this is an English-speaking country. You don't often see schools having Bengali lessons. They have French, German and Spanish but not Bengali so I think this school is doing a lot for us already by giving us an option in Bengali.' Asma was positive about the lessons:

- R.W. But you're saying yours [i.e. learning of Bengali] came from the lessons at school?  
Asma Yes.  
R.W. So you found the lessons quite helpful?  
Asma Yes.

Bilkiss said, 'I've chosen Bengali for my option so I'm improving in my Bengali.'

However, pupils also expressed various problems with Bengali lessons. At one level, pupils who arrived at the school not already literate to some extent found that the lessons didn't provide basic literacy in the language:

- Shahida **The teacher she just gave things to us and she thought we were capable of doing it but what she didn't know was we needed help for reading books and stuff and understanding how things work. She thought we could do it and gave us a lot of hard work. I didn't get much help from Bengali — the teacher — I couldn't learn much...I find it difficult to learn Bengali, I really do...**  
R.W. Do you know the alphabet and everything?  
Shahida **No, I know about four or five letters, I don't know the alphabet.**

Achhiya said, 'I noticed in the second year when we done Bengali the teacher didn't start us from Book 1, you know — "o", "ar". She went straight to Book 2. And if we didn't actually know all these alphabets before then how could we do this?'

At a higher level, some pupils who were highly literate in Bengali said that the level of the GCSE exam was low and too easy for them. For example, Fatima said, 'If you do an exam in this country it's really easy and if you do an exam in Bangladesh it's really hard. The exam is completely different.' And:

- R.W. Have you been through the exam papers for the mock?  
? **We've been through the '88 paper.**  
R.W. Was that easy for you?  
Asma } **Yes it was easy.**  
Achhiya }  
R.W. So do you think it would be possible, say, to have taken the GCSE a year ago?  
Asma **Yes.**  
Achhiya **The questions were easy.**

I was told that there is a general feeling among Bengali teachers that GCSE Bengali doesn't seem to stretch girls at the top level, and also that the GCSE requires English competence for, for example, role play and instructions given in English. So good grades will reflect English language competence as much as real fluency in Bengali. This presumably also means that recently arrived pupils from Bangladesh at a high level in Bengali will not necessarily do well in the Bengali GCSE unless their English is also good. The low level of the GCSE is reflected by the fact that girls were using the Bengali Book 5 from Bangladesh in their fifth year Bengali classes. Book 5 is the text book for the last year of primary school in Bangladesh (Warner, R., 1989).

- Asma **In this school we're on Book 5 now in Bengali. We're going to do the mock exams in December.**  
R.W. When you say you're on Book 5 do you mean the Bengali teacher is using the book from Bangladesh? For Class 5? So you're using exactly the same book? *Amar boi*?  
Asma **...It's the same kind of book because my brother brought some books from Bangladesh for us to read and it was the same.**  
R.W. I didn't realise that. So for GCSE she's using the Bangladeshi Book 5?  
Asma **That's for us to understand and do writing comprehension and all that. Then she makes us write letters and all that, that's not from that book, the letters and things.**  
Achhiya **All it has in the book is: answer the questions, read the story or read the poem.**  
Asma **Yes, it's just reading comprehension...**

---

## Sylheti versus Bengali

---

I was told that none of the teachers in the Bengali department came from the Sylhet area of Bangladesh. This means that the teachers would speak Standard Bengali whereas all — or almost all — of the girls speak Sylheti. Some of the Bengali department came from Calcutta so would presumably speak the Calcutta variant of Standard Bengali. There is considerable prejudice against Sylheti which seems to be echoed even by some English teachers:

- Asma**            **She goes, if we want to talk in Bengali we have to use the right language 'cos there's one Sylheti and one is book language.**
- R.W.              Standard Bengali you mean?
- Asma**            **Yes. She goes we have to talk in Standard language.**
- R.W.              But how can you do that?
- Asma**            **We can actually.**
- Achhiya**        **But most of the time we talk in Sylheti.**
- Asma**            **If we're talking to a friend all the time it's really funny to talk in Standard language.**

Razna seems to have internalised some of the prejudice against Sylheti. She says, 'Most of us are from the village and speak Sylheti' — this is a common view, that Sylheti is associated with rural life and is therefore somehow inferior. She refers to Standard Bengali as 'proper Bengali'. She also wanted the Bengali teachers to encourage more use of Standard Bengali in lessons:

- Razna**            **They could have said — try to speak in Standard language and that would be helpful. They don't say that, do they?**
- R.W.              Which teachers?
- Razna**            **Bengali teachers...**
- R.W.              The teachers here speak Standard Bengali, don't they? They're not Sylheti? What difference does that make?
- Razna**            **I think we ought to have more Sylheti teachers here but I think they should make pupils speak in book language when they're studying. When we're in lesson time we speak English. Bengali is our language but because we respect the teachers so we speak English. It could be the same — proper Bengali isn't our language but Sylheti is, but when we speak to them we could try to speak to them in their language.**
- R.W.              So you think they should encourage you to use Standard Bengali more?
- Razna**            **Yes, I think they should 'cos we'll have both. Proper comes in when we grow up,**

**that's really useful — I mean we need to know it. If we know it from when we are small we'd be better off.**

Bilkiss highlighted the difficulty of speaking Sylheti and trying to learn to read, not in the language you first speak (which isn't a written language anyway), but in a different language or dialect, i.e. Standard Bengali. This process of course is what happens to Sylheti-speaking children too when they go to school in Bangladesh (Warner, R., 1989). Bilkiss said, 'And in Bengali there's a real muddle. I find it difficult because at home we speak Sylheti and in books it's completely different, it's Standard. Some words I just don't know what they mean although I really try hard to read Bengali books some words I just don't understand. Although I can pronounce and read them I don't know what they mean 'cos for example one word in Bengali could mean something else in Sylheti. So it's really difficult. That's why I find it a bit confusing.' Parveen added, 'Like when you're writing letters, in Sylhet you have to write letters in the Standard form but you can't write Sylheti, you just can't make the sentence. In English you could write the letter as you're talking.'

---

## Pupils' attitudes to Bengali

---

Appel and Muysken (1987) say, 'The language [i.e. minority language] may be highly valued for social, subjective and affective reasons, especially by speakers from the younger generation in migration contexts or generally by people who feel a certain pride in minority culture. This form of language loyalty reflects the close relations between the language and social identity of ethnolinguistic groups.' The pupils I talked to at the school certainly demonstrated this strong language loyalty to Bengali:

- Asma**            **I think I should learn Bengali because it is my mother language...**
- Achhiya**        **It's our language, we're Muslim, and we should learnt more about Bengali.**
- Asma**            **It's my first language, right, and English is my second language so I should know my first language more than my second language.**

Trips to Bangladesh clearly reinforced a strong feeling towards Bengali. Sometimes this was for practical reasons, as Bilkiss said, 'When I went everything was in Bengali like signs and posters, everything. I felt a bit dumb because I couldn't understand anything and I realised Bangladesh is my motherland and I should learn some Bengali but although I don't want to get degrees and everything I should learn some so I could understand road signs and things like that, so after coming to this country I thought I should more

seriously study Bengali at least.' Asma was clearly worried what relatives would say if she didn't know much Bengali: 'If someone asks us, like someone in Bangladesh, how much Bengali do you know, it's going to be really shameful to say I haven't studied any. They're going to say just because they've gone to England they've forgotten about their mother language. So it's good if we keep up our Bengali as well.'

Razna appreciated the value of Bengali far more after her trip to Bangladesh:

R.W. What happened in the fourth year that made you feel English wasn't everything and you wanted to keep up the Bengali?

Razna We went to Bangladesh.

R.W. It was going to Bangladesh that made the difference? Why?

Razna I think in the third years kids like us needs to go to Bangladesh.

Roshonara They realise much more.

Razna Just to see...

Roshonara Much more of their culture and language.

Razna ...what a value it is. So if I went when I was about say ten I wouldn't actually follow it up — I sort of say 'Oh that's it', but when I was in the third year I was halfway through becoming an adult and I went and experienced a lot of things and I thought now Bengali is as important as English.

---

## Teachers' attitudes to Bengali

---

The head of ESL said that there wasn't a uniform attitude towards Bengali in the school, which is hardly surprising 'as staff have different levels of understanding of language issues' (Inspectors Report, 1990), and as in any school with over 100 staff, there is bound to be a wide range of opinion. According to the head of ESL, opinion ranged 'from the "ban Bengali" camp to the kind of work Ms R— does'. To start with the positive, I was privileged to observe Ms R— teaching personification in poetry to the class. She used a book called *Bengali Poetry, English Poetry* which included poems in both Bengali and English. Girls read out the Bengali poems and because they were not translated into English the teacher had to rely on their explanation of the personification in the poem. At one point in the lesson, at the teacher's request, Asma and Achhiya very movingly sang Tagore's *My Golden Bengal*, now the national anthem of Bangladesh.

At the other end of the spectrum, several girls expressed very strong views about teachers telling them not to speak Bengali:

Shahida Some teachers they still say would you mind not speaking Bengali in front of me.

R.W. And how does that make you feel?

Shahida It makes me feel intimidated actually. They shouldn't say that to us. They don't know what our feelings are. What if we think it's more comfortable and important to us to speak Bengali? Maybe we can't explain something in English...

R.W. Why do you think they do that?

Shahida Sometimes I think the teachers get pretty frustrated when they hear us speaking Bengali and they don't know what we're talking about. I think they'd like to know what we were discussing or whether we were talking about the work.

R.W. You obviously feel strongly about this. Do you, [Bilkiss] feel the same?

Bilkiss Yes, I feel the same.

Fatima But sometimes...

Bilkiss We should feel free to speak the language we want.

Fatima But sometimes they don't talk about the work they talk about something else.

Shahida Then the teachers can see we're not talking about the work.

R.W. Yes, I think you can tell whether you understand the language or not. Do you think most teachers feel that way, or some?

Shahida Just some. The majority don't mind, it's only a few...

Bilkiss Sometimes if we're discussing something in Bengali, teachers might say, discuss it in English. They might have many different reasons. Maybe they want to hear what we're talking about, or...

Shahida That's true, they should give us reasons why they want us to speak in English, but if they just come up and tell us not to speak in Bengali we should feel frustrated because they haven't given us any reason why we should stop speaking in Bengali...

Bilkiss I don't mind if teachers come up and say would you mind speaking in English, I'd like to be included in your conversation or discussion.

Shahida Yes, that's all right.



---

## LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE, SHIFT AND LOSS

---

I was interested to see to what extent, among the Bengali speakers I talked to, Bengali was being maintained and to what extent a shift to the majority language, English, was occurring with the resulting loss of Bengali. Appel and Muysken (1987) say, 'When a language is reduced in its function, which happens in the case of shift towards the majority language, generally speakers will become less proficient in it, i.e. language loss is taking place.'

Of the various factors influencing language maintenance outlined by Appel and Muysken, the low economic status, in the main, of Bengali speakers in Britain would encourage a shift towards the majority language, English. Appel and Muysken say, 'Where groups of minority language speakers have a relatively low economic status, there is a strong tendency to shift towards the majority language.' They also say that 'maintenance is supported when the minority language is used in various institutions of the government, church [sic], cultural organisations etc.' There are conflicting influences here, as Bengali would be used in the local cultural organisations but is not used in any national institutions, which presumably have more status. Education is an important factor in supporting language maintenance: 'If children's proficiency in the minority language is fostered at school, and they learn to read and write in it, this will contribute to maintenance.' So the provision of Bengali on the timetable at the school can be seen as encouraging, to some extent, the maintenance of Bengali. I will return to this point.

The other factors cited by Appel and Muysken as important in maintaining a language would indicate that Bengali would be maintained by the community that serves the school. A demographic factor is that 'as long as they live concentrated in a certain area, minority groups have better chances of maintaining their language'. Another factor is cultural dissimilarity: 'When the cultures involved are similar there is a greater tendency for shift than when they are less similar.'

So there are conflicting influences at work in the area, some working towards the maintenance of Bengali and some militating against it. There is clearly a shift to English among some of the girls I spoke to because they used English widely in the school situation or domain. Appel and Muysken say, 'Language shift is in fact the redistribution of varieties of language over certain domains. If the shift is towards the majority language, this language seems to

conquer domain after domain via the intermediate stage of bilingual language use. When the minority language is spoken in fewer domains its value decreases.'

'Language shift and language loss go hand in hand', as Appel and Muysken say. I was interested to what extent the girls I interviewed felt they were losing their Bengali. For Shahida, who was born in Britain, English was starting to capture the domain of home as well as school: 'When I want to explain something to someone I tend to do it in English rather than Bengali because I find it very difficult and some of the Bengali language is very difficult to learn. I can't sometimes pronounce the words properly and I don't know how to say it. I'm more used to English because I speak it at home to my brother and sister and English with my friends.' She said later, 'I'm sorry I know English that's my second language better than my own language.'

Asma described some of the factors in Bengali language loss thus:

R.W. In 30 years' time do you think all the young Bengalis will read and write Bengali or do you think it'll get less and less?

Asma **Less and less I think. They want to be western, go to discos and wear skirts.**

Some pupils felt that they *weren't* losing their Bengali: for example, Bilkiss said, 'Most Bangladeshis they don't lose the language because they speak Bengali in the home.' But Bilkiss herself gives a good example of exactly how Bengali is being lost when she describes the influence of her education in English on her Bengali: 'I find it easier to think in English...Even when I want to write a story and let my imagination flow I think in English. Maybe it's because I haven't written any stories in Bengali that I don't think in Bengali.'

Razna also explained how failing to study Bengali to a high level has led to a loss of the language for academic purposes:

Razna **This school, they told us going to Bengali school is a distraction in a way...They say it's good to get it over and done with in the first and second years all these, so you can concentrate on your English and pass your exams.**

R.W. Do you agree with that?

Razna **I don't actually 'cos if you continuously read Bengali, that improves as well as your English. You can set yourself homework time and you can do it. But if they tell you to get your Bengali over and done with in the first and second years that's just...you're**

only 11 or 12, we don't understand much. We're 15 now and in English we're more experienced now, where in Bengali, if I did continue I'd experience more things and I'd be as good as English now.

Razna was very aware of the process of language shift and loss. She said, 'Say my kids — if I speak English my mum she wants me to speak Bengali. I can't understand why she said that before, now I do 'cos she wants to carry on Bengali, she wants to pass it on. When I grow up I'm going to have problems with my children, they'll probably speak English. It's going to be much harder for them than it was for me.' She is trying to make an effort herself to retain her Bengali, for reasons of cultural identity. Appel and Muysken say, 'Minority group members may develop strategies to foster use of the minority language and to improve proficiency in the minority language'. Razna said she makes an effort to speak Bengali at home and at weddings, even though 'English comes up'. If she speaks Bengali she says she feels 'more sort of satisfied with myself'.

My impression was that language shift, from Bengali to English, was occurring among the pupils who had been in England since primary school or had been born in Britain. This shift was evident in the loss of the specialist Bengali required for academic subjects and it seems inevitable when academic subjects are not taught in Bengali (see the next section for further discussion of this). Although this shift was occurring in the school domain, several of the pupils I spoke to were making a lot of effort to retain and develop their Bengali, because for them to be someone who knew Bengali was an important part of their identity.

---

## LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS?

---

At an international seminar on Human Rights and Cultural Rights held in October 1987 in Recife, Brazil a preliminary declaration — 'Resolution on Linguistic Rights' — was adopted (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1990). The declaration states:

1. Every social group has the right to positively identify with one or more languages and to have such identification accepted and respected by others.
2. Every child has the right to learn the language(s) of his or her group fully.
3. Every person has the right to learn the language(s) of his or her group in any official situation.

4. Every person has the right to learn fully at least one of the official languages in the country where he or she is resident, according to his or her choice.

As Dr Tove Skutnabb-Kangas says in *Language, Literacy and Minorities* (1990), 'All the demands formulated in the Recife Draft Declaration of Linguistic Human Rights are met to a very large extent in relation to majority children. Nobody questions their right to identify positively with their mother tongue, to learn it fully or use it in official situations, for instance in schools. For majority children these rights are so self evident that they may never think of them as human rights.'

To what extent does the case-study school meet the demands of the second Linguistic Right, that every child has the right to learn the language of his or her group fully? Bengali is provided on the timetable, but as we have seen, the pupils I spoke to said that the exam was undemanding, and they were using books that would have been used in primary school in Bangladesh. My own feeling is that it is important to offer Bengali in this way as it makes a very positive statement about the value the school places on learning a language and puts it on a level with other languages learnt in secondary school, such as French. It allows girls to develop their skills in Bengali at least to some extent, albeit not to the level they would have reached in Bangladesh.

However, Skutnabb-Kangas says, 'A couple of hours a week of mother tongue instruction for a minority child is more a case of therapeutic help than of genuine language teaching.' She says that 'minorities who speak a different mother tongue from the majority need consistent support for the minority language, which may not otherwise be sustained', and 'the weaker the minority group, the stronger should be the emphasis on their own language'. Skutnabb-Kangas feels that the way to ensure that minority children learn their own language successfully and to a high level, as well as the majority language, occurs when 'linguistic minority children with a low status mother tongue voluntarily choose to be instructed through the medium of their own mother tongue...where the teacher is bilingual and they get good teaching in the majority language as a second/foreign language, also given by a bilingual teacher'. She cites the example of Finnish children in Sweden who are taught subjects in their mother tongue, with Swedish taught as a second language and some subjects also taught through the medium of Swedish. This leads to these Finnish children knowing Finnish almost as well as Finnish students in Finland and Swedish as well as Swedish children.

Clearly, the girls at the case-study school are *not* using Bengali as a medium of instruction and are therefore

inevitably losing — or not learning — the Bengali of academic subjects, as I have shown in the section on 'Language maintenance, shift and loss'. It would seem to be reasonably straightforward in a school with such a high proportion of Bengali speakers, to organise at least some lessons taught through the medium of Bengali, which would slow down or prevent language loss. I was interested in what the girls I spoke to felt about this idea.

Although they were keen to maintain their Bengali, they had various practical objections to the idea of having some of their lessons taught in English and some in Bengali, and didn't see it as a particularly fruitful suggestion. For example:

R.W. Do you think there would be any way the school could organise it differently — say half the lessons in one language and half in another, like they do in Canada, and so you might go to geography in Bengali, then history in English. So you're learning the language through the subject. Do you think that would work?

**Bilkiss** I don't think so. If they'd started like that from primary school I think it would have worked. All the children would have known the same amount of both languages. But now if it was like that, say Shahida wouldn't understand most things in Bengali. For me I'd understand all the English and most of the Bengali but not all of it.

**Shahida** I wouldn't understand anything!

R.W. So you'd all be at different levels?

**Bilkiss** Yes, everyone would be at different levels and so it would be quite difficult for the ones who don't know much English, they'd find it quite hard to understand the English part of the lesson.

**Shahida** But Canada's different, because it's only got two main languages, French and English, so half of them are French-speaking and half English-speaking. It's all right for them to have two separate lessons 'cos they know their country has two language speaking people. In this country there are lots of people and lots of languages. It'd be difficult for different schools to arrange different classes for different languages.

R.W. Even here though, where there are really only two main languages? I mean there are a few Somali girls I know.

**Bilkiss** For example there are people from India I don't think they'd understand Bengali so they'd just be sitting there doing nothing.

**Shahida** Pakistanis and Chinese.

Although Asma and Achhiya were initially keen on the idea of having some lessons in Bengali, they soon noted that Bengali isn't used in the wider world, such as the world of work, in Britain, there are real practical limitations to the point of learning Bengali to a high level:

R.W. Do you think in a school like this, where almost everyone is Bengali, do you think that system would work? Half the lessons in Bengali and half in English?

**Asma** I think it would work because the ones who don't know Bengali it would be helpful to them...

R.W. But if you had that system you'd know higher Bengali because you'd be using it in science or whatever.

**Asma** It might be the same level in Bengali and English.

**Achhiya** It's just that if you have a job the job isn't going to be half Bengali and half English.

**Asma** Yes that's true.

**Achhiya** So I don't know. B.Tech — Business and Technology — if we pass the exam and have a job in an office it isn't going to be in Bengali. So if we have half of the lessons on time wasting in Bengali it's not going to be helpful in our job.

Asma and Achhiya's reservations reflect Skutnabb-Kangas's point that if the third Linguistic Right from the Recife Declaration ('Every person has the right to use the language(s) of his or her group in any official situation') isn't met, it will die as it will not be used: 'Many people might contend that a minority child who has, through her education, become bilingual in the mother tongue and an official language, can use the official language in official situations, and does not need to have the right to use the mother tongue. This type of argumentation neglects the link between use, competence and identity; if a language cannot be used it will not be learned...Not giving languages any official rights is an indirect way of killing them.'

---

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

---

1. Among the pupils I spoke to who had been born in England or had gone to primary school here, there was a shift to English from Bengali, largely because Bengali wasn't used for academic subjects and isn't used for official purposes in this country. Girls were making supreme efforts to maintain their Bengali because of the cultural and emotional significance of the language to them, but my impression was that maintaining the language at a high level was likely to be a losing battle. Although Bengali was on the timetable at the school, to quote Skutnabb-Kangas, this is likely to be of only 'therapeutic help'. Any ideas of having some subjects taught through the medium of Bengali would be likely to be doomed to failure unless the third Linguistic Right of minorities being able to use their language in official situations was met, which in a society like Britain seems highly unlikely. Therefore, any ideas of having Bengali-medium education would be rather impractical as the girls themselves pointed out, and without Bengali as a medium of instruction, a certain amount of language loss seems inevitable.
2. Teachers should appreciate what a minority language may mean to pupils in terms of links with friends and relatives, with a culture and a country. Provision of classes, books, posters, letters home and so on in the minority language should not be confused with real development and maintenance of the language, but they are to be welcomed for their psychological significance for pupils.
3. Although the pupils themselves regretted the lack of native English speakers among their peers, they used highly successful strategies to develop their English. However, in a school where 86 per cent of pupils are Bengali speaking, it is probably necessary to accept that pupils' passive knowledge of English will always be greater than their active knowledge. This makes it crucial, as the head of ESL suggests, that as many realistic opportunities as possible to present work in English are provided.
4. In any school working on developing a language policy for bilingual learners, the voice of those bilingual learners themselves should inform the discussion.

5. Teachers should be sensitive to pupils' decisions as to when they choose to speak in the minority language, and not mistakenly feel that insisting pupils speak only English will help English development.
6. The Kingman Report (1988) talks about 'knowledge about language' which 'should inform children's talking, writing, reading and listening in the classroom'. However, the committee's view of knowledge about language consisting of knowledge of historical and geographical variation in English is very narrow. The 'knowledge about language' demonstrated so amply by the Bengali pupils I talked to does not seem to me to be the kind the Kingman committee had in mind, and yet these girls and probably most other bilingual pupils are able to comment on their language use in a very sophisticated way.

The statutory orders for English in the National Curriculum (1990) and the Cox Report (1989) enshrine Kingman's view of knowledge about language with statements of attainment such as 'discuss and write about changes in the grammar of English over time' (Reading, level 8) and 'demonstrate some understanding of the use of lexical and grammatical effects in the language of literature' (Reading, level 9). The Cox Report *says* of bilingual children that 'their experience of language is likely to be greater than that of their monoglot peers' and suggests 'their knowledge and experience can be put to good use in the classroom...to provide examples of the structure and syntax of different languages'. However, the statements of attainment in the National Curriculum do not allow this knowledge of bilingual pupils to be credited. This seems to me to be a serious omission. Nevertheless, teachers should appreciate the sophisticated knowledge about language that many bilingual pupils have and try to provide opportunities in the classroom for bilingual pupils to demonstrate that knowledge. (See the section on INSET activities for suggestions of ways to do this.)

Finally, I have learnt a huge amount from the pupils I talked to concerning their feelings about learning English and Bengali, their links with Bangladesh, and the important place Bengali occupies for them and their efforts to maintain it. I have been tremendously impressed by their articulacy, their ambitious plans for the future and their ability to straddle the culture of school and home.

# SUGGESTIONS FOR INSET ACTIVITIES

The following ideas are suggestions for different activities that could be undertaken in INSET sessions using *Bangladesh is my motherland* as a resource. All the activities (with the exception of Activity 8) are relevant to all bilingual pupils, not specifically Bengali pupils.

The ideas would be suitable for the following types of INSET and training:

- INSET for devising whole school policies on language, at both primary and secondary level.
- Initial training and INSET for Section 11 teachers and community language teachers.
- INSET for English teachers on language awareness and knowledge about language.
- Probationary teachers' induction.
- PGCE courses.

INSET is likely to be most successful if teachers work in groups on activities — either the same or different activities — and report back to the whole session. Another way of organising reporting back, if groups have been working on different activities, is for groups to re-form into completely new groups with a representative of each different activity.

## Ways in

You could do Activities 1, 2 or 3, as a way in, before introducing *Bangladesh is my motherland*. It would also be possible to do Activities 1 or 3 at the end of an INSET session.

**Activities particularly suitable for INSET on whole school language policies at both primary and secondary level.**

1. In groups, discuss the following statements and place them in the table:

AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT SURE

Bilingual pupils who are highly proficient in both languages are the most likely to code-switch (switch between the two languages).

Bilingual pupils are likely to have a greater awareness of their own language use than monolingual pupils.

Pupils are more likely to learn English if they feel that the school is interested in, and supportive of, their first language.

Schools should do their utmost to provide classes in the different minority languages represented in the school.

A pupil's first language is an important part of their identity, and maintaining a first language is part of maintaining a culture.

It is an advantage to be bilingual.

It is inevitable that when families migrate to Britain there will be a shift from the first language to English among the second generation.

It's important that schools maximise the opportunities for bilingual pupils to use English so it's OK to ban pupils from speaking their first language in the classroom.



Going to classes in minority languages after school or on Saturdays places an unacceptable strain on pupils.

It's not possible or reasonable for schools in Britain to do more than provide some books, posters, signs and letters home in the minority language(s).

If parents want their children to maintain their first language then they should arrange classes for pupils outside school.

2. In groups, read the boxed sections of Appendix B: Transcript of conversation with Fatima, Shahida, Bilkiss and Parveen. (The first boxed section is on page 20.) Decide what knowledge about language each pupil demonstrates in this conversation, and fill in the table with your comments. An example has been done for you.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LANGUAGE			
FATIMA	SHAHIDA	BILKISS	PARVEEN
Awareness of code-switching			

(This activity would also be useful for English departments looking at knowledge about language.)

**3. How do schools develop their pupils' first languages?**

In groups, brainstorm all the different things that schools in general (or, if appropriate, your school in particular) can do to develop their pupils' first languages. Then write down the ideas under one of these two headings:

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT, RAISING STATUS	REAL DEVELOPMENT OF FIRST LANGUAGE

Are there any conclusions you can come to?

4. Using *Bangladesh is my motherland*, different groups should look at **one** of the following sections:

*Code-switching*

*Learning and developing English (including The school's response to developing pupils' English skills)*

*Learning and developing Bengali at the school (including Provision at the school, Sylheti versus Bengali, and Pupils' attitudes to Bengali)*

*Teachers' attitudes to Bengali*

*Language maintenance, shift and loss*

Each group should look at these two questions:

- How does this relate to things we've noticed in our school? Is it similar or different?
- How could this inform our practice as far as bilingual pupils are concerned?

**5. Your school's language policy**

It is important that a school's language policy should be informed by the needs of the pupils.

Look at your own school's language policy in the light of the comments made by the pupils in *Bangladesh is my motherland*. Look particularly at the sections of your policy that cover:

- reading
- use of oral work in developing English and/or first languages
- use and development of first languages in school

Would your language policy need adding to or altering if you were taking into account the pupils' comments?

Or, if you don't already have a language policy or statement, can you start to devise one, again taking into account the pupils' comments?

6. Six statements made by pupils in *Bangladesh is my motherland* follow. In groups, discuss each of the statements in the light of:

- a) How first languages are treated in your school.
- b) How first languages should be treated in your school.

## Activities which have particular implications for pastoral work

Bengali books are very emotional...with English books you read it and it's really nice but...It's different. When you read a Bengali book you say 'Yes, that's me' but with an English book you will sometimes say 'Yes, it's me' but that's just them [i.e. English people].

Razna

Some teachers they still say would you mind not speaking Bengali in front of me...It makes me feel intimidated actually. They shouldn't say that to us. They don't know what our feelings are.

Shahida

Even when I want to write a story and let my imagination flow I think in English. Maybe it's because I haven't written any stories in Bengali that I don't think in Bengali.

Bilkiss

And in Bengali there's a real muddle. I find it difficult because at home we speak Sylheti and in books it's completely different, it's Standard [Bengali]. Some words I just don't know what they mean.

Bilkiss

Sometimes it's easier to speak in Bengali at times when we're talking about home things.

Roshonara

If you have a white kid who is your friend then you have to speak English to her and she has to speak English that I can understand.

Razna

7. Groups are very important in promoting language and cognitive development. Having read *Bangladesh is my motherland*, discuss when you would put bilingual pupils in groups with other pupils who speak the same language. When would you put bilingual pupils in mixed monolingual/bilingual groups? Do you think groups should be changed? When and why?
8. Many teachers express concern about Bengali pupils making long trips to Bangladesh during their school careers, which they feel disrupts their education. However many Bangladeshi parents fear that their children will lose their language, culture and identity, which is why trips to Bangladesh are important. This is borne out by Razna's comments: 'When I was in the third year I was halfway through becoming an adult and I went [to Bangladesh] and experienced a lot of things and I thought now Bengali is as important as English.'

Discuss:

What ways could schools provide more continuity when pupils make visits to Bangladesh?

How could the experience of going to Bangladesh be used positively by schools in England?

What information should schools give to Bangladeshi parents to try to ensure that visits are well timed?

## Ideas that could be used with pupils

*Bangladesh is my motherland* demonstrates the importance of pupils being given the opportunity to talk in small groups.

1. Mixed groups of pupils (monolingual and bilingual) could be given some of the comments about code-switching made by the Bengali pupils to look at and then be asked to discuss the differences between the way they speak and the kinds of things they say at home as opposed to school. Looking at register in this way could help monolingual pupils see parallels between their experience of code-switching and the experience of bilingual pupils who code-switch.

(An extra resource for this activity would be the three accounts by young people talking about the way they speak on page 67 in *The Languages Book* published by the English and Media Centre in London.)

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

APPEL, R. and MUYSKEN, P.

*Language Contact and Bilingualism*, Edward Arnold, 1987

CHANA, Urmi and ROMAINE, Suzanne

'Evaluative reactions to Panjabi/English Code-Switching',  
*Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, V,  
6, 1984

DULAY, H., BURT, M., and KRASHEN, S.

*Language Two*, OUP, 1982

*English for Ages 5 to 16*, Department of Education and Science  
(Cox Report), 1989

*English in the National Curriculum*, DES, 1990

GROSJEAN

*Life with Two Languages*, 1982

LEVINE, Josie

*Teacher Research Group*, Directory 2, 1989

RAYCHAUDHURI, Sibani and READ, Ruth

*Bengali poetry, English poetry*, Kavita Publications, 1988

*Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Teaching of English  
Language*, DES (Kingman Report), 1988

SKUTNABB-KANGAS, Tove

*Language, Literacy and Minorities*, Minority Rights Group,  
London, 1990

*The Languages Book*, The English and Media Centre, London,  
1981

WARNER, Rachel

*Primary Education in Bangladesh*, Tower Hamlets Language  
Support Team, 1989

2. Groups of bilingual pupils could discuss their use of their first language and English, either with a teacher or by themselves. They could make a tape of their conversation and transcribe it. They could use these questions as a starting point:

How have you learnt and developed your first language? What about reading and writing?

Is there anything you think the school could have done differently to help develop and support your first language?

What things have helped you develop your English?

Which language do you feel is your strongest?

Who do you speak your first language to? What kind of things do you talk about in your first language?

Is your first language important to you? Why?

Do you think that when people move from country to country it's inevitable they lose their first language? Do you feel you're losing your first language?

What do you think will happen when you have children? Will you encourage them to read and write your first language?

What do you think teachers feel about your first language?

Their answers could be used to inform a school language policy, or form part of the work of a Language Awareness course, or be used as a GCSE English assignment.



Paul Mirnyo

'Some teachers make us feel proud of our language.'

---

## APPENDIX A

---

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION STAGES

#### Stage 1: Beginner Bilingual

Bilingual English learners who may well remain completely silent in the classroom, alternatively they may use a little (supported) English. They may engage in learning activities, in groups, using their mother tongue but will need considerable support to operate in English. They may have minimal or no literacy in English.

#### Stage 2: Developing Bilingual

This group can participate in all learning activities, but it will be very evident in speaking and writing that their first language is not English. They will be able to express themselves orally in English quite successfully but their literacy in English will require considerable support, particularly their writing.

#### Stage 3: Developing Bilingual

Bilingual pupils whose oral and written English is developing well enabling them to engage successfully in all activities. Their written English, however, will tend to lack complexity and will show considerable evidence of structures and errors associated with the student's level of English language acquisition.

#### Stage 4: Fluently Bilingual

These pupils are totally fluent in English both orally and in their literacy. They write as native speakers and do not make errors that are influenced by their mother tongue.

---

## APPENDIX B

---

### TRANSCRIPT OF CONVERSATION WITH FATIMA, SHAHIDA, BILKISS AND PARVEEN (Year 11, [15-16 year olds])

(The boxed sections of the appendix relate to Activity 2 in the section on INSET.)

- FATIMA** I was born in this country in 1975. When I was five and a half I went to Bangladesh and stayed there six years to study Bengali. I got up to Class 5.  
I can still read Bengali.
- R.W. Do you like reading Bengali?
- FATIMA** Yeah, it's all right. I like it.
- R.W. Did your parents send you back especially to learn Bengali?
- FATIMA** Yeah, my mum and dad they took us to Bangladesh to learn Bengali a bit more and they left us there. They came back to this country with my little brother to make his passport British and then they went to Bangladesh and then they came back to this country.
- R.W. Did they bring you back when they thought you'd learnt enough Bengali?
- FATIMA** Yeah.
- R.W. Were they worried you wouldn't learn Bengali if you were here?
- FATIMA** Yeah.
- R.W. So where did you study then?
- FATIMA** It was in Chhatok.
- R.W. It was just an ordinary primary school was it?
- FATIMA** Yes, it was a mixed school.
- R.W. How did you feel about doing that? Did you like it?
- FATIMA** Yes, I like it.
- R.W. Had you been to school here before you went back to Bangladesh, or not?
- FATIMA** I went to the nursery school.
- R.W. Can you remember, did you find it difficult when you first went to Bangladesh or was it easy to adjust?
- FATIMA** I was good at English but when I went to Bangladesh I forgot all of it.
- R.W. How old were you when you came back? Eleven?
- FATIMA** Yes.
- R.W. And did you come straight to — School?
- FATIMA** Yes, in the first year.
- R.W. And how did you find going straight from a primary school in Bangladesh

to — School?

**FATIMA** I found it really hard. I couldn't speak English, I couldn't understand anything.

R.W. And what happened? How did you learn English, how did things change?

**FATIMA** It didn't take me that long to learn English. Still I'm not that good at English.

R.W. Which language do you feel is your strongest language? Which language do you use the most?

**FATIMA** Bengali. Most of the time.

R.W. In school or out of school?

**FATIMA** Both.

R.W. You feel you're better at Bengali than English?

**FATIMA** Yes.

R.W. Which language, in your head, do you think in?

**FATIMA** (Laughs)

R.W. If you're thinking about something and not talking to anybody, which language are you thinking in?

**FATIMA** Oh, Bengali.

R.W. Always?

**FATIMA** Yes.

R.W. When you're in school, who do you use English to?

**FATIMA** To my friends most of the time.

R.W. And when do you use Bengali?

**FATIMA** (Long pause)

R.W. At school you obviously use Bengali too. Who do you speak Bengali to? Is it also to your friends, or is it to people that you know don't speak much English, or what?

**FATIMA** To people who don't know much English.

R.W. So like if you were speaking to Ambia for example you'd speak to her in Bengali?

**FATIMA** Yes.

R.W. But would the four of you speak Bengali?

**FATIMA** Yes.

R.W. Why would you sometimes speak Bengali and sometimes speak English?

**FATIMA** 'Cos if we can't, you know, sometimes it's hard to explain in English. So we say it in Bengali easily.

R.W. So is it just for that reason that you use Bengali — that it's difficult in English? Or do you sometimes just feel like speaking Bengali?

**FATIMA** Yes, I feel like it sometimes.

R.W. Do you know why you sometimes feel like it?

**BILKISS** It just slips out. Sometimes in English you can't explain something you're thinking

because in Bengali and English they are two languages and there are some meanings you can't explain in Bengali. If you are talking about an event that happened in school and it concerned a lot of English speaking, you wouldn't explain it in Bengali; it's difficult, and it's the same the other way round. If something happened at home and you want to explain it to your friends, if you speak in English it's sort of difficult. You can't explain a Bengali event properly when you're using English.

R.W. Say something happened in a science lesson and the teacher would have been talking in English and you wanted to explain it to someone else, something to do with the work, would you tend to use Bengali or tend to use English?

**BILKISS** I tend to use English. It would depend who I was speaking to. For example, Ambia I wouldn't talk to her in English, like Shahida, Fatima and Parveen I'd use English.

R.W. Are you saying you'd just use Bengali about home things?

**BILKISS** Not necessarily, because we do sometimes explain events in English. Sometimes I feel more freer speaking things in English and explaining things in English. But in Bengali I sometimes get stuck. I just can't find the appropriate word to use.

R.W. Why's that, do you think?

**BILKISS** I think it's because I came to this country quite young and I haven't been to Bengali school in Bangladesh. I just learnt some Bengali in these clubs, right, but because they weren't proper schools they didn't actually teach you properly, they just taught you alphabets. I just picked up some Bengali words. I came to this school and I've...

**SHAHIDA** You can still read and write some Bengali though.

**BILKISS** A little bit. I've chosen Bengali for my option so I'm improving in my Bengali.

**SHAHIDA** I'm like that, right. A few of the girls in the class can't read or write Bengali properly. 'Cos I was born here so I never really went to Bangladesh and studied the culture or anything. I went there for six weeks when I was one year old but obviously I can't remember anything. I went back when I



was five for ten months and I did go to the Bengali school but I didn't learn much because I was quite young and I didn't quite understand how the language was. When I want to explain something to someone I tend to do it in English rather than Bengali because I find it very difficult and some of the Bengali language is very difficult to learn. I can't sometimes pronounce the words properly and I don't know how to say it. I'm more used to English because I speak it at home to my brother and sister and English with my friends. But I do speak Bengali.

R.W. Who to?

SHAHIDA My mum I speak Bengali to but my dad he understands English so if I say anything in English he can reply back to me. She's more used to Bengali and she knows how to read and write Bengali but when it comes to me it's really really difficult for me.

R.W. So when you're thinking, do you think in English or Bengali?

SHAHIDA Yes, I often think in English.

BILKISS I find it easier to think in English too.

SHAHIDA I don't tend to think in Bengali. If I thought something in Bengali it won't make sense to me. But if I talk to myself in English it just makes sense to me better. I understand what I'm saying.

BILKISS Even when I want to write a story and let my imagination flow I think in English. Maybe it's because I haven't written any stories in Bengali that I don't think in Bengali.

R.W. Whereas Fatima, you have written stories in Bengali?

FATIMA I did a lot.

R.W. So if you're thinking of a story like you are at the moment in English are you thinking of it in your head in Bengali?

FATIMA Yes.

R.W. Are you kind of translating as you write it down?

FATIMA I think in Bengali and then I write it in English.

R.W. Shahida, you seem to be saying that you're losing the Bengali. Are you sorry about that?

SHAHIDA I'm not gaining anything but I don't think I'm losing the language, but I am sorry that I'm not as good as Fatima and Parveen. And I'm sorry I know English that's my second language better than my own language. I

can read and write English but I can't read and write Bengali and that's kind of depressing to know. You can't read your own language and that's sad. But I did have Bengali lessons in this school but it didn't help much.

(Laughs)

R.W. Why not?

SHAHIDA 'Cos the teacher she just gave things to us and she thought we were capable of doing it but what she didn't know was we needed help for reading books and stuff and understanding how things work. She thought we could do it and gave us a lot of hard work. I didn't get much help from Bengali — the teacher — I couldn't learn much. And I did have a tutor when I was young but he didn't teach me very much either. I find it difficult to learn Bengali, I really do. I can't adapt to the reading as well as I could do in English.

R.W. Do you know the alphabet and everything?

SHAHIDA No, I know about four or five letters, I don't know the alphabet.

R.W. What about you Parveen, you've been very quiet!

PARVEEN I was six when I came to this country and I was just moving about when we first came, we didn't settle in one place, and I changed schools, about three or four primary schools I changed and then I came to — primary school and settled there and came here when I was 11 and I didn't go to any clubs or anywhere to learn Bengali, my mum she taught me how so I know quite well Bengali as English. I can read and write Bengali.

R.W. Because your mum taught you?

PARVEEN Yes, she taught me, so as an option I chose Bengali and I can write Bengali.

R.W. When you came when you were six had you been to school in Bangladesh?

PARVEEN No, I didn't started. And in the first year I went Bangladesh in November and I came back in June so I stayed seven months. My mum tried us to go to Bangladesh school so we could learn a bit more but we just couldn't because of all those mosquitoes biting. We were really ill.

R.W. Wouldn't you have been old for the class? Wouldn't you have had to go into Class 1?

PARVEEN No, I could have gone on because I knew Bengali because my mum taught me. So I could have studied a bit, but I was so ill. We

came back to this country because my mum thought if we stayed there and we couldn't go to school we would miss both languages, both Bengali and English. If we'd come late we wouldn't get a seat in this school so we just came back.

R.W. Would you have liked to go to school in Bangladesh?

PARVEEN Yes, I would have, to learn a bit more of my language.

R.W. And you're doing the option now?

PARVEEN Yes.

R.W. And you (*to Fatima*) are doing it too? How do you find doing it as a subject for exams?

FATIMA It's OK.

BILKISS I find it quite difficult actually. Before I went to Bangladesh, when I was a first year I went to Bangladesh and I missed two years in this school. When I went everything was in Bengali like signs and posters, everything. I felt a bit dumb because I couldn't understand anything and I realised Bangladesh is my motherland and I should learn some Bengali but although I don't want to get degrees and everything I should learn some so I could understand road signs and things like that, so after coming to this country I thought I should more seriously study Bengali at least.

R.W. Was that your decision or your parents'?

BILKISS It was mine but my parents were sort of, they were prompting me to learn Bengali. Um, I think I'm trying harder now than I did before I went to Bangladesh. I realised it's quite important to me.

R.W. Why? Because you'll go back to Bangladesh all through your life?

BILKISS No, it's not that. I think I'll stay here rather than go to Bangladesh, but it's my first language and I should know some.

SHAHIDA You feel satisfied with yourself that you know your own language.

BILKISS It's something that you're successful at.

R.W. I agree with you. Do you think when people move from country to country that it's inevitable they lose their language or should they fight like you're doing to keep their language?

SHAHIDA I think people don't tend to lose their language when they move countries. Maybe some who are not very good at their own language, they might lose their language and they might use the language in the

country they are going to. But I don't think any of us would lose, would stop speaking Bengali.

BILKISS Most Bangladeshis they don't lose the language because they speak Bengali in the home. It's the actual reading and understanding. And in Bengali there's a real muddle. I find it difficult because at home we speak Sylheti and in books it's completely different, it's Standard. Some words I just don't know what they mean although I really try hard to read Bengali books some words I just don't understand. Although I can pronounce them and read them I don't know what they mean 'cos for example one word in Bengali could mean something else in Sylheti. So it's really difficult. That's why I find it a bit confusing.

R.W. Do you all find that a problem? Do you find that a problem, Fatima?

FATIMA Yes, it's the words, you know the words are really hard to understand.

BILKISS It's really Standard.

FATIMA My dad told me not to choose Bengali, but Mrs — she forced me to choose it.

R.W. Why did your dad tell you not to choose it?

FATIMA He said you've learnt enough in Bangladesh, you've studied it for six years so why choose Bengali? But Mrs — forced me.

R.W. What did you want to do?

FATIMA I don't mind Bengali but he goes you're definitely going to get Grade A so why did you choose Bengali?

R.W. But are you enjoying it?

FATIMA Yes, it's all right.

R.W. This thing you're talking about with Sylheti is interesting because that must be true for all people from Sylhet, and little kids when they start school in Bangladesh it must be very difficult. Can you remember that, when you went to school in Bangladesh, that what you were speaking was different to what you were learning to read? Or is it too long ago to remember?

BILKISS I found it hard when I first started learning. I used to go home to my mum and say what does this mean, what does that mean, and keep asking her questions. My mum she's really good at Bengali and she helped me quite a lot.

**PARVEEN** Like when you're writing letters, in Sylhet, um, you have to write letters in the Standard form but you can't write Sylheti, you just can't make the sentence. In English you could write the letter as you're talking.

**SHAHIDA** I don't find it difficult with Sylheti and Bengali because I always use Sylheti. 'Cos I don't write Bengali it doesn't bother me how people write or speak. 'Cos I don't intend to go to Bangladesh and live the rest of my life there, I intend to live somewhere else, not this country and my dad wanted us to learn the Bengali culture and I have four brothers and sisters who were born here too. My sister is fluent in Bengali and English so she's the one in the house who really knows Bengali. The rest of us don't know at all so he wanted us to learn the culture but because my dad knows it's a bit too late for us to learn 'cos he knows we're older and it'll be hard for us to learn he's not forcing us, and he said if you want to go to Bangladesh you can just go but you can't learn it now because you're really old and you can't adapt to the language very well.

R.W. So is he saying it's too late?

**SHAHIDA** He's not saying it's too late. He's just saying it'd be harder. It's never too late, it's just going to be harder. It's not hard on my sister because she knows it well enough. She got an A in Bengali and she got really good results in English too so she's got more chances of getting somewhere in life because she's got two languages behind her, unlike us who've got one.

R.W. Why did she manage to develop the two languages and you didn't?

**SHAHIDA** Well...

R.W. Was she older when she came from Bangladesh?

**SHAHIDA** No, she was born here, we were all born here. When she chose Bengali she knew she didn't have a chance of getting a good grade. She wanted to give it a try so she gave it all she had and she came up with a really good grade. She tried hard and she achieved. I think she had more willpower than us, basically.

**FATIMA** If you do an exam in this country it's really easy and if you do an exam in Bangladesh it's really hard. The exam is completely different.

**SHAHIDA** My sister she studied in Bangladesh too, she's strong at some things and we're strong at other things. Like she wouldn't want to learn about how planes work and stars and science, although actually she's good at science too. I'd like to work in the air force and she wouldn't. I'd really try to get in there.

R.W. What do you think will happen when you have kids? Will you encourage them to read and write Bengali?

**BILKISS** I think I'll encourage them so they can get along so even if they go to Bangladesh for a holiday they can get along in Bengali without saying, what's this mean, what does that mean.

R.W. But you were saying it wasn't just because of going, you were saying it's because it sort of belongs to you, weren't you?

**BILKISS** Yes, sort of like that. And it's always an advantage to know another language.

**SHAHIDA** I think it'd be up to them. I'd like them to know the language but it'd be up to them if they wanted to read and write. I'd encourage them to learn the language and I'd be happy if they knew the language very well. If they didn't know the language I wouldn't be upset, I wouldn't say why didn't you learn the reading stuff. They've got their own lives — if they don't want to read and write Bengali it's their choice and I can't force it upon them.

**BILKISS** I'd just give them a chance like Shahida's saying, I'd just encourage them if they want to learn Bengali.

R.W. What difference do you think it makes, being in this school? In the school I used to teach in there were Bengali pupils but only about 12 so they wouldn't hear Bengali being spoken around the place and they'd probably be in a class where no one else spoke Bengali. What difference do you think it makes being in this school, where nearly everyone speaks Bengali?

**BILKISS** I think if a new Bengali girl comes to this school she'd feel more comfortable and at home here than being surrounded by people who speak another language.

**SHAHIDA** She wouldn't be so nervous in this school because she'd see Bengali kids and if she didn't understand something she'd always have people to go to who could explain it to her. Some of the Bengali girls around here who can't speak English properly are at an advantage in this school because the

- majority are Bengali. They have a chance of getting help for English basically.
- FATIMA If Ambia needed help then we'd translate it into Bengali. The Bengali girls who come and don't know English do get help from Bengali girls.
- R.W. But from your point of view is it kind of easier to maintain the language because you're in this kind of atmosphere?
- ? Yes.
- R.W. I wondered if in the same way, if you'd been in my school it would have been easier to lose the language?
- BILKISS I wouldn't have felt uncomfortable because all through Infants and Juniors I went to school here. Well, in the school I went to it was half half.
- SHAHIDA No, there were all races, Pakistanis, Indians.
- BILKISS All different kinds.
- SHAHIDA Our primary school didn't only have Bengalis.
- BILKISS We went to the same school you see.
- SHAHIDA Maybe that's why we can speak English a bit better than others because we had English surrounding us.
- BILKISS So I wouldn't feel uncomfortable going to school where there was a majority of English.
- R.W. I'm not saying you'd feel uncomfortable, I'm saying would you find it harder to keep up the Bengali because you wouldn't be using it in school?
- BILKISS I don't think so.
- SHAHIDA She'd be speaking it at home so she wouldn't lose it.
- BILKISS But in home I speak English to my brother and sisters, and my dad and your dad (*to Shahida*) understand English so if I ask him something he understands, it's my mum I mainly talk Bengali to.
- R.W. You wanted to say something, Fatima?
- FATIMA Like me when I came to this country I went to — School. I found it really hard, I felt like crying because everyone speaks English. I'm the one who speaks Bengali and if I ask them to explain it to me they didn't. Next day I didn't go back to this school again.
- R.W. So you're saying you would find it hard to be at a school like the one I taught in? But do you think being in a school where almost everyone speaks Bengali affects your English? Do you think you'd learn more English in a school where more people speak English, or don't you think it makes a difference? You speak good English anyway!
- FATIMA I think it would have made a difference because if you go to a school where lots of girls are English and you talk English all the time except when you go back home and talk Bengali to your mum mostly because she wouldn't understand English.
- BILKISS I think it'd have an effect on newcomers who can't speak English because there'd be Bengali-speaking girls everywhere. It'd be difficult for them to learn English quickly because Fatima she couldn't speak much English in the first year and now she speaks fluent English, she learnt it so quickly. If people met her now they'd think she always spoke English. But if newcomers come now it'd be difficult because everyone's speaking Bengali, they wouldn't hear much English. It'd be difficult for them to learn English. I don't think it'd be difficult for us because we know Bengali and English so we wouldn't lose English at all, because we know it.
- R.W. So how do people who do come learn English? Say they come in the third year and there's lots of people to help them in Bengali, how do they learn English?
- BILKISS You know ESL, the teachers know the girls who can't speak English and they come in the lessons and they give them a lot of help and they start off with the basic stuff of English and gradually they give them harder things and I think that's how girls start to learn.
- R.W. Why do they want to learn English though if someone can always help them in Bengali?
- SHAHIDA They want to get around in a foreign country. When they come they can only speak Bengali but if they were walking about and met a lot of English people they wouldn't know what to say so it'd be good for that person to learn English. She'd get around town more easily.
- BILKISS I think its similar to all languages. For example, if you're in France you should know how to speak the language for the country you're staying in so you can be independent instead of asking someone else to help you all the time.
- R.W. But do you think everyone feels like that? For example, I knew a Bengali girl in my old school who didn't want to be in England at all, missed Bangladesh terribly, I think was quite depressed and although she was very

good at reading and writing Bengali, she wouldn't learn English, maybe as an act of rebellion because she didn't want to be here in the first place.

- BILKISS** That's how — is sometimes, isn't she?  
?  
R.W. I read a story once in Bengali about that.  
? So you think that happens sometimes?  
? Yes.  
**BILKISS** Sometimes children can't help it, even if they're good at Bengali they find it really difficult to understand what the teacher's telling them. For example, in the story I read the girl couldn't understand any English and the teacher set her homework she didn't understand and she couldn't do her homework. She couldn't tell the teacher that she didn't understand so she was kind of stuck, she couldn't speak for herself and she didn't understand what the teacher was saying, so sometimes although they want to understand it they're not capable.  
R.W. But are you saying that most of the girls who come here do want to learn English?  
**BILKISS** I think so.  
? They're eager.  
R.W. They don't just think, 'I can speak Bengali, it doesn't matter?'  
(*Laughter*)  
**BILKISS** I think they realise they have to learn English.  
R.W. What makes them realise that?  
**BILKISS** Things like going to the shop, if someone says something in English and they'll say I don't want to be ashamed like that if I go to another shop.  
? Self-respect.  
R.W. What about your mum Bilkiss, does she speak English? Is it difficult for her if she goes out?  
**BILKISS** Well she hardly goes out, apart from shopping, but either I or my dad goes with her. If my mum was on her own I think she'd be able to cope but because she doesn't need to speak English, she doesn't speak English.  
? My mum wants to learn English.  
? My mum wants to learn too...  
**BILKISS** I specially didn't want to come back [from Bangladesh] because I had fun there but when I got back here I thought why did I stay so long because I couldn't get a place in school and I was really worried about my education and I almost gave up hope of

getting into a school. I had to wait two years so I missed the first and second year. I thought, oh no I'll never get a seat and I almost gave up hope. One Saturday I found this letter and I was overjoyed, I felt something in my stomach I was so happy. I tried to get books from the library to read at home but it wasn't the same.

- R.W. Coming back to this school, everyone does Bengali from the first year, don't they? Unless they don't speak Bengali of course. Do you think there would be any way the school could organise it differently — say half the lessons in one language and half in another, like they do in Canada, and so you might go to geography in Bengali, then history in English. So you're learning the subject through the language. Do you think that would work?  
**BILKISS** I don't think so. If they'd started like that from primary school I think it would have worked. All the children would have known the same amount of both languages. But now if it was like that, say Shahida wouldn't understand most things in Bengali. For me I'd understand all the English and most of the Bengali but not all of it.  
**SHAHIDA** I wouldn't understand anything!  
R.W. So you'd all be at different levels?  
**BILKISS** Yes, everyone would be at different levels and so it would be quite difficult for the ones who don't know much English, they'd find it quite hard to understand the English part of the lesson.  
**SHAHIDA** But Canada's different, because it's only got two main languages, French and English, so half of them are French-speaking and half English-speaking. It's all right for them to have two separate lessons 'cos they *know* their country has two language speaking people. In this country there are lots of people and lots of languages. It'd be difficult for different schools to arrange different classes for different languages.  
R.W. Even here though, where there are really only two main languages? I mean there are a few Somali girls I know.  
**BILKISS** For example there are people from India I don't think they'd understand Bengali so they'd just be sitting there doing nothing.  
**SHAHIDA** Pakistanis and Chinese.  
**FATIMA** Bengalis can understand Indian though.  
(*Brief discussion about Indian films.*)

R.W. Is there anything else you think the school could do to help develop and support your Bengali? Or do you think it's fine that they're offering you the subject?

SHAHIDA They're offering us a subject, that's a lot they're doing because this is an English-speaking country. You don't often see schools having Bengali lessons. They have French, German and Spanish but not Bengali so I think this school is doing a lot for us already by giving us an option in Bengali.

R.W. So you don't have any complaints about that?

SHAHIDA I personally don't.

BILKISS I don't either.

R.W. What about the rest of you, do you think it's fine?

FATIMA }  
PARVEEN }

R.W. What do you feel about how teachers feel about Bengali? Do you think people here encourage you to use your language and to be proud of it or do you think some people don't like it very much or what?

SHAHIDA If teachers know this girl doesn't know how to speak English very well then they won't mind at all if we spoke Bengali. If they knew we knew how to speak English but still spoke Bengali then it'd be quite rude towards them because they wouldn't understand what we were saying. They'd think we were saying something impolite or something. If we know English then we should speak it in front of the teachers. If we're not very confident about speaking English then it wouldn't matter whether we spoke Bengali or English.

R.W. But you're not necessarily being rude to a teacher, are you? I mean you can tell if someone's being rude, can't you?

SHAHIDA Some teachers they still say would you mind not speaking Bengali in front of me.

R.W. And how does that make you feel?

SHAHIDA It makes me feel intimidated actually. They shouldn't say that to us. They don't know what our feelings are. What if we think it's more comfortable and important to us to speak Bengali? Maybe we can't explain something in English. So if they come up to us and say would you mind not speaking Bengali it'd be very rude of them telling us because maybe we'd find it difficult speaking English and we know why we're speaking Bengali in the first place rather

than coming up and saying, don't speak Bengali.

R.W. Why do you think they do that?

SHAHIDA Sometimes I think the teachers get pretty frustrated when they hear us speaking Bengali and they don't know what we're talking about. I think they'd like to know what we were discussing or whether we were talking about the work.

R.W. You obviously feel strongly about this. Do you, (Bilkiss) feel the same?

BILKISS Yes, I feel the same.

FATIMA But sometimes...

BILKISS We should feel free to speak the language we want.

FATIMA But sometimes they don't talk about the work they talk about something else.

SHAHIDA Then the teachers can see we're not talking about the work.

R.W. Yes, I think you can tell whether you understand the language or not. Do you think most teachers feel that way, or some?

SHAHIDA Just some. The majority don't mind, it's only a few.

R.W. Do the majority...It's one thing not to mind, it's another to be very pleased you speak another language. You're saying some people mind, that's one category, are you saying others don't mind but they're not very fussed either way and then are there some people who make you feel really proud you know another language?

SHAHIDA In my English lesson I think Ms — and Ms — they make girls like Ambia feel proud of the language because they tell them if you can't do this in English, write a story or an essay in Bengali and we'll have it translated so I think some teachers make us feel proud of our language.

R.W. Do you think ideally it'd be better if all teachers were like that?

? Mmmmm.

BILKISS I think most of them are.

FATIMA Like Ms —.

R.W. Is it the teachers who tell you not to speak in Bengali that you really object to? Might that be on the stairs or corridor that they tell you that or...

BILKISS Sometimes if we're discussing something in Bengali, teachers might say, discuss it in English. They might have many different reasons. Maybe they want to hear what we're talking about, or...



**SHAHIDA** That's true, they should give us reasons why they want us to speak in English, but if they just come up and tell us not to speak Bengali we should feel frustrated because they haven't given us any reason why we should stop speaking in Bengali. Maybe we can't discuss it in English it's quite difficult for us so that's why we're discussing it in Bengali.

**BILKISS** I don't mind if teachers come up and say would you mind speaking in English, I'd like to be included in your conversation or discussion.

**SHAHIDA** Yes, that's all right.

**BILKISS** But if they just come up and say don't speak in Bengali I don't like them sounding really demanding. I feel that's not right.

**R.W.** What do you do, if they say that, do you shut up or do you switch to English or what?

**BILKISS** I'd ask Ms why she wants me to speak English.

**R.W.** So you challenge them?

**BILKISS** It hasn't happened to me yet.

**SHAHIDA** It hasn't happened to me yet either but I think if you asked them they'd come up with a reason straight away.

**BILKISS** Yes I think so.

**R.W.** Have you seen it happening to other people?

**BILKISS** } Yes.

**SHAHIDA** }

**BILKISS** The people I've seen it happen to aren't really good at English so they don't answer back or challenge the teacher. I felt quite bad at this, they didn't actually know how to express themselves in English so the teacher should let them explain themselves in Bengali.

**R.W.** Do you think some teachers feel insecure because they're not in control because they don't know the language?

**SHAHIDA** I think some teachers feel they'd like to be in control but they're not because we're not including them.

**R.W.** Or do you think they think if you speak in English it develops your English?

**SHAHIDA** I think some teachers feel like that.

**R.W.** Do you think that's true or not?

**SHAHIDA** I think it's true.

**R.W.** Would your English be better if you never spoke Bengali in school at all?

**SHAHIDA** How would it help us if we stopped speaking Bengali? I don't think it'd help us

in any way if we stopped speaking in Bengali. We're learning English as much as we're learning Bengali around here.

**R.W.** How does your English develop, though? What makes it get to a better level? How do you learn new words for example?

**ALL** Books!

**BILKISS** Mainly books. One of my main hobbies is reading. I just love reading, from when I was really young in primary school. I used to get loads of books from libraries.

**SHAHIDA** I hated reading but now I'm getting into it.

**FATIMA** I hated reading too.

**R.W.** Do you still hate reading in English?

**FATIMA** Yes, but I like reading in Bengali.

**R.W.** So how do you learn new words in English?

**FATIMA** Sometimes I read books and I don't understand some of the words so I look them up in the dictionary and write them down.

**R.W.** What about hearing new words? Where does that come from? Teachers?

**ALL** Yes, mainly.

**FATIMA** And if I don't understand I ask the teachers.

**BILKISS** And Mrs — she uses really sophisticated, really long words.

**SHAHIDA** And then after the assembly she tells us you've learnt a new word remember it.

**?** And what about Mr —?

**R.W.** Who's he?

**SHAHIDA** He's a science teacher.

**R.W.** And he uses long words?

**FATIMA** Yes he does.

**R.W.** Does that develop your vocabulary?

**BILKISS** Well, he thinks we know it and then if we say we don't understand he explains it in simple English so I think it does help.

**SHAHIDA** I also learn it from home because my sister tries to increase my vocabulary. She says you're getting older, you shouldn't use words like that, use more sophisticated words. I read books and she gets me books, thick ones, novels and if I don't understand she tells me the meaning so I kind of learn from my sister.

# APPENDIX C

## SAMPLES OF PUPILS' WRITING (in English lessons)

**Bilkiss**

'Stream of consciousness about work experience'

During my work experience there were lots of different situations I had got involved in. On my first day I just observed what the people in the admissions office did, and I had nothing to do. To be honest I was dead bored, I

**Shahida**

'An English girl in Hollywood'

The following story I am going to write is about an adolescent who has so many dreams of so many different things in this world, that she herself is not sure that even one of the many dreams she has will come true.

**Ambia**

writing in Bengali

এক দিনে একটা বন্ধু আমার সাথে গেল, তার নাম ছিল সুনীল। সে আমায় বলল, আমি তোমার জন্য কিছু করতে চাই। আমি তাকে বললাম, তুমি কি করতে চাও? সে আমায় বলল, আমি তোমার সাথে গিয়ে কিছু করতে চাই। আমি তাকে বললাম, তুমি কি করতে চাও? সে আমায় বলল, আমি তোমার সাথে গিয়ে কিছু করতে চাই।

**Achhiya**

'The dream of killing my lover'

Out of all this laughter in my room, I suddenly heard a small sound like a bird. I became quiet and used all my powers of hearing to find out what it was that made me listen.

**Razna**

work on Portia

On many occasions Portia feels very proud and self-superior about herself. She thinks of her self as very fair and grand. Then again she is very loyal towards her long-dead beloved father who has left her with no choice on choosing her own ideal male companion.

**Fatima**

work on Anne Frank

Anne is getting to know Peter much more better and Peter is getting to know Anne too. Now she is getting to like him ~~than~~ than before. In a way Peter loves Anne. Peter likes the way Anne smiles.

**Asma**

'The Golden Bangladesh'

It is still winter. I'm looking forward to the 1st of April which is in spring, because on that day my family and I are going to go to Bangladesh. I think Bangladesh is the best place in the whole world. In Bangladesh Bengali we call Bangladesh "Shonar Bangladesh", which means Golden Bangladesh.







"The interviews themselves are so informative and instructive that they are bound to be a useful resource for teachers wanting to understand more about the relationship of the bilingual learner to both Bengali, Sylheti and English...The pupils speak so perceptively and articulately and reflectively..."

Dave Lawrence,  
Curriculum Advisor for English,  
London Borough of Tower Hamlets

"Incredibly valuable, especially for ESL training and/or induction for staff in bilingual or multilingual schools..."

Annie Birch,  
Bilingual Coordinator,  
Central Foundation Girls' School, London



**Minority  
Rights  
Group**

Minority Rights Group  
379 Brixton Road  
London SW9 7DE

FAX +44 (0)71 738 6265

☎ +44 (0)71 978 9498

ISBN 0-946690-96-0