

# **Dreams and Realities:**

## **Developing Countries and the English Language**

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Paper 9

A 'Matthew Effect' in English language education in a developing country context

by Martin Lamb

# A ‘Matthew Effect’ in English language education in the developing world

Martin Lamb

*For unto every one that hath shall be given and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.*  
**(New Testament, Gospel According to Matthew, XXV, 29)**

## Introduction

As enshrined in the second of the Millennium Development Goals (see Appendix 3), education is generally agreed to be an important engine of national development, capable of making a major contribution to the reduction of poverty and inequality within developing societies. Yet education itself has often been accused of fostering inequality. UNESCO’s report on the Dakar ‘Education for All’ initiative highlighted ‘deep and persistent inequalities’ in developing country education systems, arguing that ‘the circumstances into which children are born, their gender, the wealth of their parents, their language and the colour of their skin should not define their educational opportunities’ (UNESCO 2008:1-2). Continuing inequity in education is not only against the spirit of the ‘education for all’ agenda, the report warned, but also threatens to transmit poverty across generations, in turn undermining long-term economic growth and the development of civil societies.

Educational inequality features as a central theme of several chapters in this book. Tembe and Norton (2011, Chapter 6 this volume), for example, contrast the language of education in urban and rural areas in Uganda and report the anxieties of rural parents and communities that their children are being denied access to the one language, English, which can truly facilitate their advancement; while Williams (2011, Chapter 3 this volume) makes a strong argument that African children who are not educated in their mother tongue are actually the ones suffering disadvantage. As Seargeant and Erling (2011, Chapter 12 this volume) show, these heated debates about the relative benefits of global and local languages in schools are not confined to Africa; Coleman (2011, Chapter 5 this volume), for example, describes attempts among advantaged social groups in Indonesia to establish English medium state schools to operate alongside the majority Indonesian medium

education system, with a view to giving their children a competitive advantage in further education and work.

Whereas the focus in these chapters was mainly on the language of education and local people's differential access to it, in this chapter I hope to expose inequalities within the learning of one language – English – within one state system. The setting is provincial Indonesia, where in the absence of any Anglophone colonial legacy and a historical openness to external cultural influences there has long existed a consensus, both in official discourses and popular belief, that proficiency in English is beneficial for individuals and society at large (Beeby 1979, Lamb and Coleman 2008). From 2002 to 2004 I studied the motivation and learning behaviour of a small group of young adolescents starting to learn English in junior high school. The rapid divergence in experience and achievement among these learners over their first 20 months of language education was suggestive of a 'Matthew Effect', where the cumulative effects of a slight early advantage lead to the 'rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer'. The divergence became all the more striking when I returned to Indonesia in 2008 to meet the same students and learn about their progress. I will first present previous reported cases of the Matthew Effect in education, as well as theoretical perspectives on educational inequality, before presenting the case in Indonesia. I will conclude with some tentative suggestions for how English language education in Indonesia – and, by extension, other developing country contexts – might be made more equitable, so that greater numbers of young people develop and realise linguistic aspirations.

## The Matthew Effect

The term 'Matthew Effect', deriving from the biblical passage quoted above<sup>1</sup>, has been applied to many different areas of human endeavour, notably economics where a Matthew Effect has been observed in the way various factors combine to widen the wealth gap between the world's richest and poorest countries, and between social classes within states (Rigney 2010); and academia, where small differences in ability and opportunity among early career academics have been shown to result in major differences in later career achievement (Merton 1988).

In the field of school education, Walberg and Tsai (1983) used the term to characterise their research findings, which showed that the interaction of three basic factors – early educational experiences, current educational activity and motivation (see Figure 1) – meant that:

*socio-economic and ethnic groups that scored somewhat higher than others in the early grades scored much higher in the later grades; and the gap or cumulative advantage increased steadily with grade levels. (Walberg and Tsai 1983:360)*

Their own research with American schoolchildren suggested that home background and associated early educative experiences were the most significant predictor of achievement in general science, contributing directly to performance at school but also indirectly by making it more likely that children from certain ethnic and socio-economic groups had higher motivation to learn and showed more adaptive learning behaviour.

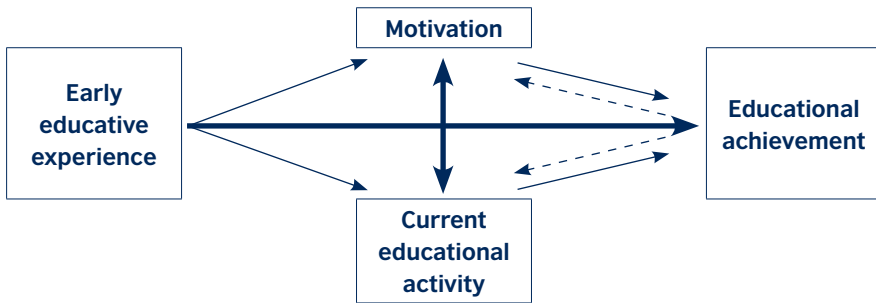


Figure 1: A diagrammatic representation of the Matthew Effect (based on Walberg and Tsai 1983)

Educational Matthew Effects have been explored in most detail in the development of children’s reading skills (Stanovich 2000). It has been found that children who have a very slight edge in phonemic awareness when they start school – that is, they understand how words are made up of different sounds – are in a good position to make use of instruction in the alphabetic system; they start reading independently more quickly and therefore get more practice; as they practise, they develop automaticity and can give more attention to meaning, which in turn increases their enjoyment and encourages them to read more. By the 5th grade it is estimated that the top ten per cent of children read ten times more than the bottom ten per cent, with obvious benefits for other aspects of their education. Social background is implicated because it is often children from middle class backgrounds who come to school with slightly higher phonemic awareness, because parents have spent more time reading to them. A related example of the Matthew Effect is the TV programme *Sesame Street* in the USA, which was originally designed to increase the educational attainment of children from poor working class backgrounds who liked watching TV. Evaluation studies found that paradoxically it tended to increase gaps in achievement, because middle class parents spent more time discussing the programme with their children, enabling them to get more out of it.

In language learning, Williams et al. referred to the Matthew Effect in their study of pupils’ motivation to learn French and German in UK schools. They found that by Year 9 there were already significant differences in the motivation and attitudes of high proficiency and low proficiency students and ‘such differences had clearly emerged early on in these students’ secondary school careers’ (Williams et al. 2002:523). They speculated that pupils who were perceived as good language learners by their teachers and by themselves tended to enjoy lessons more, were thereby motivated to learn more, did better and so on, while other pupils were caught in a vicious circle of poor performance and motivation. Williams et al. also hinted at a possible role for social background in these effects, as proficient students reported their parents as being particularly supportive.

The relations between social background and education have of course been theorised at more philosophical levels. Educationalists have been aware of social class differences in educational achievement since the 1960s. Over the following decades, Bernstein (e.g. 1971) attempted to explain these differences in terms of

the language ('code') used in school which, he argued, privileged the middle class children who, using the more elaborate academic codes at home with their parents, were socialised early into the educational processes of knowledge transmission.

Far more influential in contemporary theorising, however, is the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who viewed education as the means by which dominant social classes reproduced their culture and influence and sought deliberately to bring to light the usually invisible processes which underlie such social inequalities. Bourdieu's best known concept, cultural capital, was developed 'to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes' (1986, cited by Pennycook 2001:124). All children inherit, through family and other early social practices, cultural capital along with varying levels of social and economic capital; but only the more prestigious types of cultural capital are granted legitimacy in particular 'fields' and in education those tend to be the values and priorities of the dominant social class. Further, cultural capital becomes embodied in the 'habitus', a nexus of bodily and mental habits and dispositions, including language, which causes us to feel comfortable in some environments (such as school) and uncomfortable in others (for reviews of social and cultural capital in educational research, see Dika and Singh 2002 and Lareau and Weininger 2003). Thus, in his own example, Bourdieu writes that a parent might accuse his son of being 'bad at French', yet his underperformance is actually 'a direct function of the family's cultural atmosphere' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:109). In many societies the English language currently represents a highly valued form of cultural (linguistic) capital and recent studies in Hong Kong (Lin 1999, Flowerdew and Miller 2008) and Spain (Block 2008) have shown how social class influences the way young people experience institutional language learning.

## **An Indonesian case study**

In the rest of this chapter I will describe what appears to be an instance of the Matthew Effect in English language learning in provincial Indonesia, using concepts from Bourdieu as well as psychological constructs from the literature on L2 motivation to describe the contrasting trajectories of different learners. The original purpose of the research study was to investigate the motivation of Indonesian young adolescents, aged 11–13, to learn English as it evolved during their first two years of formal study in junior high school. The school was situated in what might be described as an 'emergent middle class area' of a Sumatran town which I will call 'Ajeng', and though its own facilities were basic and the intake was of mixed socio-economic background, it had a good reputation in the local community. As a provincial capital the town had experienced an influx during the Soeharto years of relatively affluent and well-educated civil servants from Java, whose offspring tended to study at this school. In more recent times, local political autonomy and laissez-faire capitalism has encouraged the rapid growth of forest-based industries, giving Ajeng something of the character of a frontier boomtown.

My research used questionnaires at the beginning of the first year and end of the second year to get a broad view of motivational trends for the whole year group (approximately 200 pupils); and then chose a 'focal group' of 12 learners to track in more detail over the subsequent 20 months, through interviews at three

points, by observing them in English classes and by visiting them outside school. Eight of these learners were chosen because, on the basis of their questionnaire results and teacher comments, they had particularly high motivation. The other four were chosen, on the same basis, as being 'less motivated' to learn English, though each one stressed in their first interview with me that they did want to learn English. I also interviewed nine English teachers about their perceptions of learner motivation. In reporting my findings, I will begin by characterising the general population's motivation to learn English, before describing in more detail the learning trajectories of the 12 'focal' learners.

## **Learner motivation for English**

On entry to the school, learners' motivation to study English was extremely high, with only one respondent out of over 200 saying that it was 'not important' to them. Their motivation could be characterised as future-oriented, blending both integrative and instrumental motives (Lamb 2004). The questionnaire responses showed that the majority of these 11- and 12-year-old learners were acutely aware of the effects of globalisation on their community and understood that mastery of English could help them gain access not only to successful careers but also to international friendships, further study abroad, new forms of technology and entertainment and to social and geographic mobility. They looked forward to the process of studying the language in junior high school.

After 20 months of study, their perception of the potential importance of English remained very high (in fact, slightly more rated it as 'very important' to them), but their enjoyment of the process had declined slightly. Fewer pupils thought that there was intrinsic pleasure to be found in learning the language, while their comments about the language tended to relate more to their classroom experiences rather than to its global role. For example, at the beginning of her studies one student wrote in her questionnaire response that she thought English was 'very important' because 'if I learn English I can gain self-confidence and many benefits ... It's the world language'; after 20 months she assessed it only as 'quite important', 'because learning English in this school is just like learning it elsewhere ... It's not so satisfying.' This general moderate fall in intrinsic motivation to learn was not unexpected; it is commonly reported in studies of learner motivation of all subject areas during the middle school years (see Wigfield et al. 1998).

## **Learner performance in English**

I had no independent data on learners' performance in their English studies over the research period. However, besides providing a more in-depth picture of each focal learner's perceptions of their motivation, the interviews gave me insight into the development of their language competence. I started each interview in English, but quickly changed to Indonesian if the learner preferred. During the first phase of interviewing, all the learners used mainly Indonesian, though one or two of those previously identified as 'more motivated' did try to exploit the opportunity of conversation with a native speaker (in almost all cases, their first such opportunity) to use a few English words and phrases. During the second interviews eight months later, the same pattern repeated itself, though one was now able to express herself

in English almost all the time. In the third interviews a further 12 months on, all seven<sup>2</sup> of the ‘motivated’ learners used English for most of the time, reverting back to Indonesian when communicatively challenged or when the conversation got very animated. One pair of girls actually spoke to each other in English<sup>3</sup>. In stark contrast, the four learners who were previously identified as ‘less motivated’ made no significant attempt to use English during the final interview. In other words, there was a striking divergence over these 20 months in the performance in English of the focal learners, with some making considerable progress and others making none at all.

To illustrate this contrast, I give below extracts from the third (2004) interviews with two pupils, the first one (who I call ‘Marlina’) identified initially as a ‘more motivated’ learner:

*I: Do you feel confident now about your English?*

*M: Not yet*

*I: How do you feel about speaking in English, for example speaking in English to me?*

*M: Er I feel it's very hard, but I want to study it very hardly and I know in future I can speak English yang sempurna [perfectly]*

*I: Uh-uh right, so how do you feel when talking to me?*

*M: agak grogi! [rather nervous]*

Clearly, as she herself recognises, Marlina’s English is far from the level of perfection she demands but her determination to use the language to express herself as far as she can (as well as her high ambitions) are very evident and she has come a long way from her first interview, 20 months earlier, when she had used her L1 throughout.

The second learner, ‘Krisna’, was identified initially as ‘less motivated’. What is striking about the beginning of the interview with Krisna – and with two of the three other less motivated learners<sup>4</sup> – was their reaction to my invitation to speak English; not only were they unable to respond, they smiled in amusement at the notion, as if they could not conceive of themselves as legitimate English speakers.

*I: OK K, can you say something about yourself? Can you speak about K? For example, ‘I am K. I live ...’*

*K: ... [smiles, shakes head]*

*Conversation continues in Indonesian:*

*I: How are your English studies going?*

*K: Not so well*

*I: Why is that?*

**K:** Don't know

**I:** Not so ... what?

**K:** Don't understand well

**I:** ... So how do you feel?

**K:** Mmm ... nervous

**I:** That's a pity ... what makes you feel nervous?

**K:** Afraid of making a mistake

**I:** If you make a mistake, are you told off?

**K:** Yes

**I:** By who?

**K:** The teacher ... but she doesn't get angry

**I:** So why do you feel nervous?

**K:** I'm afraid

**I:** But if she doesn't get angry, why be afraid?

**K:** I'm ashamed

**I:** Ashamed oh ... Studying English for you, is it important or not important?

**K:** Mmm, I feel it's important

**I:** And your desire to learn?

**K:** It's less now.

As the extract indicates, Krisna still recognises the importance of English in principle, but his negative feelings about the process of learning – particularly his failure to understand what's going on in the lesson and the teacher's unsympathetic reaction to his mistakes – has reduced his desire to learn. It is also noteworthy that both learners admit to feeling nervous, yet their anxiety apparently has different origins and outcomes – for Marlina, it is a by-product of her excitement in exploiting a rare opportunity to communicate with a native speaker; for Krisna it is a symptom of his fear of failure.

Four years on, I interviewed these two and the other ten focal learners again, offering them the same choice of speaking in English or Indonesian. Now the gap in speaking performance had widened much further. As a crude measure of this gap, I counted the number of turns begun in English during the interview by six of the learners. The results are presented in Figure 2.



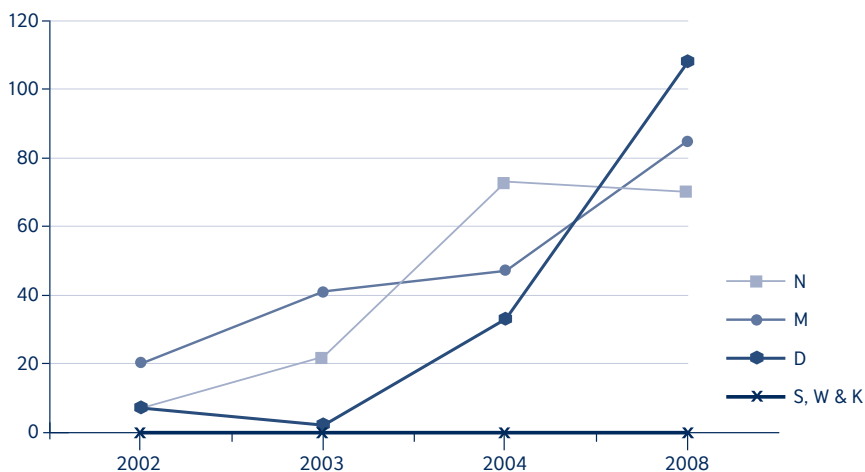


Figure 2: Number of utterances begun in English during the four interviews, for six learners: N, M, D, S, W and K.

For Marlina (M) and two of the other ‘more motivated’ focal learners, the graph shows a distinct upward trend<sup>5</sup>, one that I am confident would be replicated by the other five learners. By contrast, Krisna (K) and two of the other ‘less motivated’ learners still showed no willingness to communicate in English with me, despite four more years of English language learning.

Of course, oral fluency is only one aspect of L2 proficiency. All the learners, including S, W and K, claimed to have learned some English grammar or vocabulary in the intervening years and all had passed school and national tests. But in terms of their willingness and ability to use the language, as they stood on the threshold of adulthood, some had not progressed at all since they were in their first year of formal study, while the others had attained sufficient functionality to hold a long conversation with a native speaker. In the next section I will argue that this widening gap in achievement can be understood in terms of the three factors which Walberg and Tsai (1983) identified as producing a Matthew Effect (see Figure 1).

## How the Matthew Effect works in this context

### Early educative experience

Walberg and Tsai (1983) included in their construct of ‘early educative experience’ several background variables such as parental education and occupation, ethnicity, household income as well as early formal education experiences. My own background data on the 12 focal learners was much more limited and I had never intended to use indicators of social or educational background to select them. However, through their survey responses, information gleaned from my interviews with them and from visits to their houses or private language schools, I was able to identify telling differences among the participants which broadly corresponded to the division between ‘more motivated’ and ‘less motivated’ learners.

By definition, learners in the ‘more motivated’ group had advantages over the others on entry to the school, since the teachers confirmed them as ‘motivated’ learners when I originally chose them on the basis of their questionnaire responses. Evidently they brought with them cultural capital which allowed them to be recognised by the teachers as potentially good learners of English. I have shown that this did not consist of any significant oral linguistic ability, at this stage, but would have manifested itself in other ways. Among them would have been their behaviour in English classes, which I discuss below (see the third sub-section below on ‘learning activity’), but other possible factors which caught the attention of teachers would be their relatively neat appearance, their use of Bahasa Indonesia and some awareness of their relatively privileged family backgrounds.

These eight students’ fathers were: two senior civil servants (the father of one girl was on the town council, another was head of section in the local office of agricultural affairs), two civil servants of unspecified rank, two businessmen (at least one of whom, Marlina’s father, was doing extremely well as the owner of palm oil estates), one university lecturer (his daughter had actually been born in the USA while he was studying for Master’s degrees there) and one doctor (two mothers were also doctors). Three had parents who spoke English to a high level, while all had other family members who spoke some English. All eight had studied some English in primary school; this was a surprise to me as the language was not (and still is not) on the national primary curriculum, but some local primary schools had begun to fit English lessons (usually no more than once a week for 45 minutes) into their provision, often asking parents to pay extra fees for the recruitment of a teacher. And on entry to the junior high school, seven of the eight had already studied English at a private language school in the town.

Meanwhile, three of the four ‘less motivated’ learners were disadvantaged in significant ways. Krisna’s family were recipients of the school’s small scholarship fund for the local poor. His older sister spoke some English and he had studied some English at primary school, but had not attended a private language school. Learner S was always very conscious of the fact that he came from a small town in the hinterland of the province – ‘at primary school I didn’t learn English, I was in the village and there weren’t any English lessons’ (fourth interview) – and during his second year in the junior high school his father, a forestry worker, died and he had to return to the village. Learner R’s father was, in his words, ‘an ordinary civil servant’, by which he probably meant of lower rank though I have no independent verification of this; he did have one year’s lessons in English at primary school but did not attend a private language course. What is more, his parents were going through a difficult divorce (a fact he never revealed to me) which teachers said were the source of long-term behavioural problems which he displayed in school. The fourth ‘less motivated’ learner’s (W) situation is harder to explain as his father was Dean of the Faculty of Education at the local university. Furthermore, W had studied some English in primary school and had been sent to a reputable private language school for over a year. Yet despite these auspicious beginnings, W never developed an interest in, or apparently put much effort into, learning English.

An unexpected source of evidence for the influence of family background on English learning came from my interviews with teachers. These covered several

topics, including their own careers, perceptions of their job, their views on their school pupils and their progress in English. Eight of the nine teachers interviewed mentioned social background as a significant determinant both of pupil progress and their own job satisfaction, either at previous schools they had worked at or their current school. For example, early in my first interview the teacher commented:

*The first time I taught English in [Junior High School X] it seems to me my ability to teach English did not develop well. Teaching was difficult because the background of the students there did not support them to speak English in class. Every time I ask them questions, no response from the students.*

This teacher went on to stress the importance of study outside school, for example in private language schools, as if it was a pre-condition for successful learning in the state school. Another teacher stressed the role of parents:

*Home, it [is] an important thing, I think, an important role, if their parents don't think about English, or they don't care about English, they never give suggestions to the students to study English, they never guide the students how to study English, or when they have to study at home, ah, it's impossible for the students.*

Even though the majority of parents in this generation are unable to speak English themselves, it is their attitude towards their child's language learning which in turn helps to determine the child's own attitudes, this teacher implies.

A familiar problem in many parts of the developing world is that children are needed for economic activity to support their families and miss school entirely. In this part of Indonesia, the problem is not so extreme and school attendance is good, but some teachers argued that many children were disadvantaged by having to earn extra income for their family after school, as this meant there was no opportunity to attend private English courses or buy study materials. Moreover, there are suggestions that pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds faced more subtle psychological pressures. As a teacher working at a school on the outskirts of Ajeng put it:

*Most of my students can [speak] ... English but maybe they are afraid, this is the problem ... if their friends say [speak] in English, some of their friends laughing, laughing, smile with their friends ... makes the students shamed.*

She claimed that there were '15 students' in her school who could speak English, but that, despite her own encouragement, they were deterred by the mockery of their friends, who might accuse them of being 'sok-sokan' or 'kebarat-baratan' – showing off or trying to be a westerner.

### **Motivation**

This leads us into the second of Walberg and Tsai's (1983) factors underlying the Matthew Effect. As I have written above, my survey instrument revealed generally very high levels of motivation to learn English among students in this junior high school, in terms of the importance of English, the reasons for its importance (e.g. instrumental motives, integrative motives) and their desire to learn it. In interviews, my focal learners all affirmed their desire to learn the language and its potential

importance to them – this is true even of the low-achieving learners (see the extract from K's interview above), which is why I designated them 'less motivated' rather than 'unmotivated'.

However, a discursive analysis of the interviews over the period 2002–2008 has allowed me to identify revealing differences in the nature of these learners' motivation, which may help to explain the differential effort that they invested in learning English. Using Dörnyei's L2 motivational self-system as a theoretical framework (see Dörnyei 2009, also Whitehead 2011, Chapter 16 this volume), I found strong evidence in the talk of the 'more motivated' group for the development of 'ideal L2 selves' over this period and the persistence of 'ought-to L2 selves' in the 'less motivated' group (Lamb 2009, Lamb in press). In other words, some of the learners were able to develop vivid images of themselves as future users of the language, which, according to Dörnyei's theory, would make them more inclined to invest effort in learning the L2 in order to close the gap between this 'ideal self' and their 'current self'. By contrast, learners with an 'ought-to L2 self' are motivated mainly by a feeling of duty to meet the needs or desires of significant others, such as parents or teachers – a weaker form of motivation that is likely to make them more concerned to prevent failure in conventional tokens of achievement, such as exam results or school reports, rather than seek out opportunities for genuine learning.

To illustrate this distinction, I will draw on my interviews with the same two learners, Marlina and Krisna (for further examples, see my discussion of two other learners in Lamb 2009). In 2008, both learners were aged 17 and in their final year at senior high school. When asked about her immediate plans after finishing school, Marlina replied (in original English):

*I'd like to go to Padjadjaran University, Bandung, to the Communication Faculty um and I'd like to study there, after that, this is my wish, I can go to maybe in the other country I'd like to get the Magister in Broadcasting I'm very interested in broadcasting ... I get a contract with Ajeng TV for one year but I don't know, I cannot do I can do it or not because after the final exam I'd like to move to Bandung or Jakarta ... if I want to progress my education I have to move to the other place, Ajeng is not qualified to ... progress my education.*

Her long-term vision is to work in broadcasting and she has already worked out some 'proximal subgoals' (Dörnyei 2009) to help her achieve this ambition, including getting a job in the local TV station (through her parents' social connections) and studying at the prestigious private university in the cosmopolitan city of Bandung. English is implicated in these plans because, as she put it, 'it is going to be very useful for my education'. Looking further ahead, she said 'I have a lot of things that I want to [do] in ten years ... I want to make my parents *naik haji ibadah haji* [go on the Haj pilgrimage] with my own money with my own money'.

Krisna's talk about the future was of a different nature, more diffident and less certain as his language here reveals. In response to my question about where he might be in ten years' time he replies (translated from Indonesian):

**K:** *Um maybe I don't really know yet but if it's up to me, my desire is to become a computer expert in a company and maybe also, in ten years' time, because perhaps I'll already have children, maybe I'll give some basic lessons in English, so that my children will understand English from the beginning of school, because now it's already the beginning of the global era.*

**I:** *Uh-uh ... you mean your own children?*

**K:** *Yeah*

**I:** *How many children will you have?*

**K:** *Haven't thought about it yet!*

**I:** *Will you live in Ajeng, or where do you want to live?*

**K:** *Or for that, I don't know yet, it's a population factor that, some places are full, we don't know what'll happen in ten years' time.*

He does express a goal – to become a ‘computer expert’ – but at no time in his interview does he talk about what plans he has made to achieve this goal. Interestingly, he is conscious of the importance of English for the future, but rather sadly relates it to the futures of his children not himself. When later in the interview he does express a wish to learn more English himself, it is, as Dörnyei's theory would predict, with a view to preventing problems rather than expanding his personal capacities: ‘if I don't master English well then maybe I'll have difficulty doing my job and also problems in accessing computers.’

To summarise, I am arguing that the focal learners who I originally designated ‘more motivated’ in fact had a different type of motivation to learn English than the others. As Ryan (2009) has recently written, education systems in many countries promote the value of English, such that when young people are asked about whether they like English or want to learn it, they tend to follow the ‘scripted discourse’ and agree that it is important for their futures. However, it is often only a minority who invest the considerable effort necessary to learn the language while at school. In the case of Ajeng, it appears that learners from more privileged, middle class backgrounds are able more easily to imagine themselves (and each other) as future users of the language and that this socially-derived ‘ideal L2 self’ may be the psychological mechanism which encourages self-regulation of learning.

### **Learning activity**

One obvious way in which socio-economic background could influence the learning of English, already alluded to, is through providing the means for study at private language courses. In fact, several learners and teachers identify the private course as the primary site of learning English; at the beginning of her first interview with me in 2002, for example, Marlina responded to my question ‘What do you think of your English classes?’ with the statement ‘I'm already nearly in level 8’, referring to the institutional rankings at the LIA (Lembaga Indonesia–Amerika, Indonesian-American Institute) private English school. Six years later she is still attending the same school, now in the final level ‘High Intermediate 3’ and attributed the

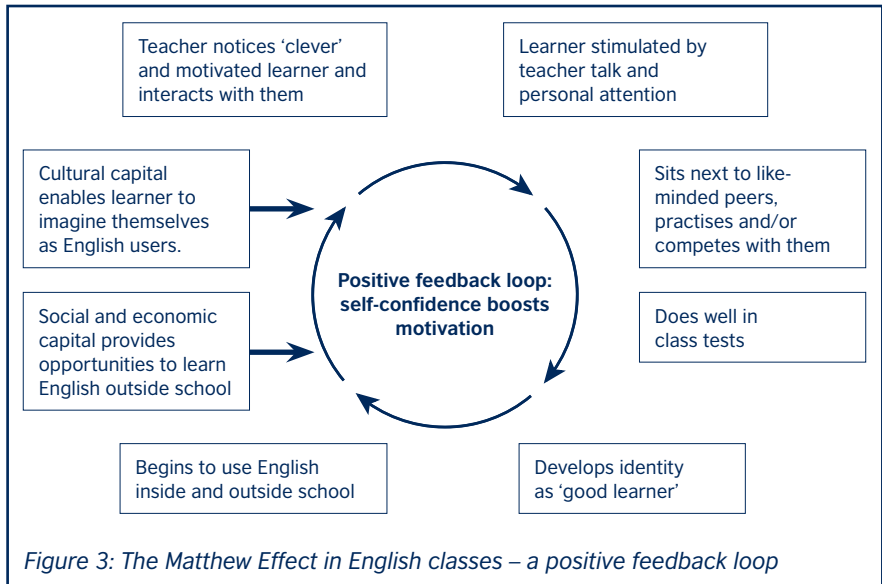
development of her oral fluency to the speaking practice she gets there, whereas in school she only learned 'grammar, grammar, grammar'. Hamid et al.'s (2008) study in Bangladesh also found private tutoring in English to be extremely popular with students and parents (mainly because of the perceived deficiencies of the state system) and they identified a direct positive effect on students' achievement. As they argue, this huge and growing global industry, sitting 'at the interface between education and commerce' (Hamid et al. 2008:282) and offering considerable competitive advantage to children from more affluent homes, warrants more systematic attention from educationists.

Besides attending private courses, my focal learners also mentioned several other out-of-school resources that had helped them learn English. These include computer games, local English language magazines, satellite TV programmes and movies in English and English language pop songs. In Marlina's early interviews she repeatedly mentioned the books and cassettes that her mother regularly bought her ('If I go to bookstore she always buys some cassettes English, book of English', third interview) and during my visits to their homes other learners brought out English language materials (e.g. novels, dictionaries, magazines) which they said they had learned from. Apart from offering practice opportunities, such materials can also play a motivational role; Marlina again: 'all of my mother's books are in English so I realise I have to be able to understand English' (third interview, part-translated).

In addition to the economic capital necessary to fund long-term private study or learning materials, families also can provide the necessary social capital to facilitate other forms of learning. Parents and other older relatives with English proficiency may themselves be a resource for learning, or know of other opportunities through their own social networks, while older siblings or their friends can serve as 'near peer role models' (Murphey and Arao 2001) as well as English conversation partners. In her 2008 interview, for example, Marlina claims that she uses English regularly with several Indonesian friends, either in speech or through online chatting, including a house guest who is the daughter of the Indonesian ambassador to Canada. By contrast, two of the 'less motivated' group of learners deny any activity involving English outside school. As learner 'S' from the rural district told me in 2008, 'here, it seems there isn't any [English]. There aren't any people like that, using English outside school, there's none, no homework, except for private lessons, there isn't any' and as he went on to say, he had neither the means nor the desire to take private lessons. Krisna admits to an older sister and a former girlfriend who know English, but he only actually uses English when listening or singing English pop songs. The other two 'less motivated' learners may have had more opportunities to use English outside school, but neither appears to have taken them. Space does not allow a full discussion of their cases, but both had suffered from negative learning experiences inside school, not only related to English.

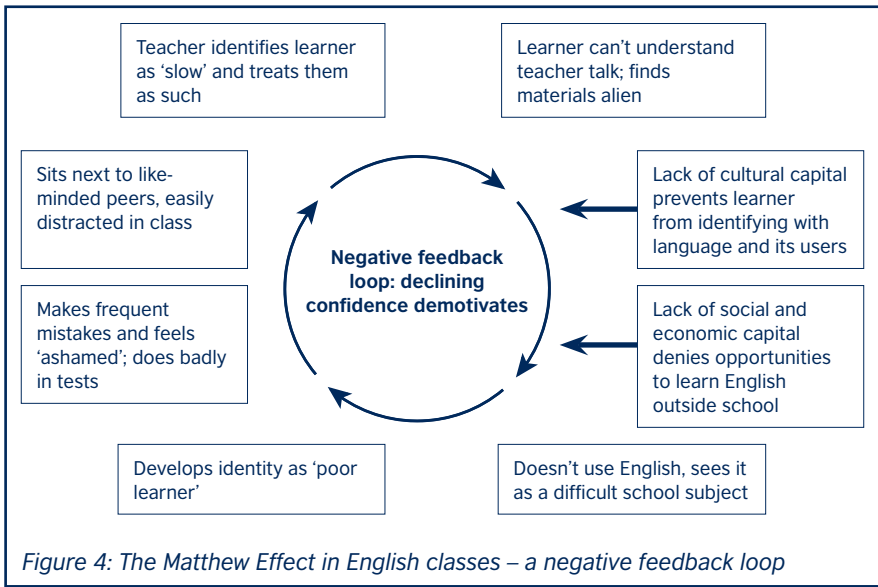
My observation data reveal telling differences between the behaviour of the two groups of students in their school English classes. Classrooms tended to be hot and crowded (35–45 students per class), lessons were long (90 minutes) and routine (a similar pattern of reading texts, grammar and vocabulary exercises, choral repetition and teacher–student questioning) and the textbooks were dull in content

and appearance; to learn English in these circumstances demanded strategic effort. Similar to what Shamim (1996) observed in Pakistan, the more motivated learners tended to sit in prominent positions in the class, which afforded them a good sight of the blackboard and aural reception of the teacher's voice; the less motivated learners tended to sit at the back or sides of the class with like-minded peers, reducing the chances of them being called upon to contribute but increasing their chances of being distracted by friends inside or outside the class (a frequent complaint by all the learners)<sup>6</sup>. Teachers meanwhile, not unnaturally, tended to focus their attention on the more responsive learners seated in the central area, while those in the outer area could become quickly stigmatised as 'poor learners', a fate that befell at least two of my focal group: One learner had a placard placed around his head by the teacher labelled 'Lazy Boy', while Krisna's teacher described him as 'slow' and, during my observations, very rarely invited him to contribute.



*Figure 3: The Matthew Effect in English classes – a positive feedback loop*

As Walberg and Tsai's (1983) model predicts, in most educational contexts there will be a strong reciprocal effect between learning activity and motivation<sup>7</sup>. Based on experiences in school, many learners experience either a positive or negative feedback loop, spiralling upwards towards greater achievement or downwards towards (in the worst case scenario) a state of 'learned helplessness'.



I have attempted to illustrate the kind of processes at work in this Indonesian junior high school English lessons in Figures 3 and 4 and would argue that, along with learning activity and motivation to learn English outside school (for which, perhaps, a similar diagram might be drawn), this serves to explain the observed Matthew Effect, where small early advantages are turned into large long-term differences in achievement.

Of course, this is a gross simplification of the factors operating in any particular class or for any particular individual and there are many other possible factors which may work to accelerate or slow down the process. There will also be exceptions to the pattern presented. For example, almost all the 'more motivated' learners had complaints to make about their school English classes, indicating that they were not always positive experiences that fuelled their self-confidence and motivation. Marlina, for instance, expressed severe criticisms of her English teacher, angrily denouncing her as 'an irritable person' who was always angry in the class. On further discussion, with both Marlina and the teacher concerned, it appeared that the teacher had become tired of Marlina's own criticisms of her teaching style and English language. The teacher herself lacked the cultural capital – above all, she lacked oral fluency in English – to convince Marlina that she could help her learn English. As a consequence, Marlina decided to focus her energies on her private school.

I should report one further complicating factor: some of the 'more motivated' learners were selected for elite 'acceleration' or 'excellence' classes while in junior high school, where they received slightly more intensive English classes, better classroom conditions and more competent teachers. This policy of selection is part of the trend towards English language elitism reported by Coleman (2011). These one or two years of preferential treatment probably contributed towards their motivation – by boosting their self-confidence – and their progress in the language



(though some of them complained that the extra tuition was simply 'more of the same' and did not actually help them learn English).

A Matthew Effect could probably be found for almost all school subjects. But there are several reasons why it might afflict languages more than others. As Gardner (1985) has long argued and as a recent UK report (CILT 2005) confirms, school pupils' attitudes to languages are uniquely susceptible to influence by attitudes at home: if parents value foreign language learning, there is a high likelihood their children will too and parents' attitudes are in turn deeply influenced by socio-cultural factors in the local community. Related to this, Tsui (1996) has pointed out how language learners are more vulnerable to criticism and negative evaluation than other subject learners because there are so many chances of making mistakes or, one might add, of sounding pretentious when successful. A third reason why Matthew Effects may be more of a problem in language education is suggested by Jones and Jones (2001), who argue that underachievement is very difficult to correct in language classrooms because of the cumulative nature of the subject matter. With some other school subjects, a new week brings a new topic and a fresh opportunity to perform well; in language classes, especially those using a grammatical and/or lexical syllabus, failure to learn material in one week is likely to cause poor task performance the following week, potentially leading to the spiral of poor performance and demotivation presented in Figure 4. Finally, in education systems where language teachers are strongly encouraged to teach in the L2, the subject is also the medium of instruction in a way that it is not in other lessons. In the questionnaire responses in this study, a frequent complaint about school English lessons was that they were incomprehensible: 'I can't catch the main point when the teacher explains something,' said one pupil.

## **Does a Matthew Effect in English language education matter?**

My argument in this chapter is that, in this small-scale case study of teenagers learning English in provincial Indonesia, I found a striking divergence in competence in the language over the six years of schooling, whereby some appeared to make no progress at all in oral communicative ability while others achieved quite a high level of functionality. There is sufficient evidence to attribute this divergence to a Matthew Effect, in which the social, economic and cultural capital provided by home background and early educative experiences enabled some learners to benefit more from the state provision of English language education, as well as to exploit opportunities to learn the language outside school, leading to a massive competitive gain over six years.

Like all case studies, its findings are unique and no claims can be made for general validity. I have no reason to believe, however, that this school was significantly different from other 'good' schools in other provincial towns in Indonesia. In more 'average' schools, I would speculate that the pool of advantaged learners would be fewer but that similar processes may be at work, though further research is necessary to confirm this. This type of mainly qualitative study also needs to be complemented by larger-scale quantitative research, in which specific background variables are correlated with learning outcomes as in Walberg and Tsai (1983) and that reported in Stanovich (1986).

If a Matthew Effect does exist in English language education, it is possible that it will contribute in the very long term to a widening economic and cultural class divide. If Marlina's academic and work aspirations materialise, she can be expected both to achieve even greater fluency in English and to earn a good income. When she has children herself, she will be able to provide them with even greater advantages than she had, giving them an even bigger head start over their peers. Already it is not unusual to find private 'pre-school English' courses being advertised in larger Indonesian towns. On the other hand, Krisna's expressed wish to ensure his own children learn English (echoed by one of the other 'less motivated' learners) is perhaps a small sign of hope that such a cycle of cumulative advantage is not inevitable.

It may also be claimed that Indonesia, like other developing countries, would not significantly gain from having a majority of the population proficient in English (Coleman 2010 quoting Thandika Mkandawire, Professor of African Development at the London School of Economics) and that therefore educational policy should prioritise the small minority who do have a chance of gaining proficiency. Yet this argument ignores the fact that English, as a form of cultural capital, has considerable currency within Indonesia and is used as a common gate-keeping device in both academia and the jobs market (cf. Seargeant and Erling 2011). To ensure equal opportunity to acquire English skills therefore becomes a moral issue, for as Lin has argued in the context of Hong Kong, 'ignoring the children's varying amounts of initial linguistic [and] cultural capital contributes to the reproduction of existing social stratification and the lack of social mobility of children from disadvantaged groups' (Lin 1997:24). Moreover, if it is true that large sections of the population are currently being denied a reasonable chance of learning English, this represents a vast loss of potential talent not only in language specialisms but in all the other occupations for which English ability is an entry requirement.

## **How can a Matthew Effect be alleviated?**

UNESCO (2009:235) warns that 'one of the central lessons to emerge from this report is that there is no quick fix for enhanced equity' in educational provision in developing countries. The innate desire of parents to give their children all possible advantages means there will never be a completely level educational playing field, as parents themselves have differential advantages to offer. Nevertheless, for the moral and economic reasons suggested above, governments need to minimise inequality in provision of English language education. In relation to the development of L1 reading, Stanovich (1986) argued that early intervention was essential to prevent the cycle of disadvantage from generating momentum. Policies such as Head Start in the USA and Sure Start in the UK were designed precisely to increase early educational attainment among disadvantaged social groups.

In Indonesian English language education, the equivalent focus would be on the first years of junior high school when the language is introduced into the formal curriculum. It is essential that all children are given the best possible foundation in their language study, even if some of their peers have already benefitted from primary level English language services. Space prevents a full elaboration of curricular implications, but among the most important may be these:

- Lin (1999) and Flowerdew and Miller (2008) discuss the need for disadvantaged learners to develop ‘creative discursive agency’, by which they mean the will to expand their own discursive repertoire by finding opportunities to engage with English in the social environment. This may, they point out, lead to learners developing strategies of resistance to English (such as those documented in Sri Lanka by Canagarajah 1999), though even this, they argue, is better than the passive submission and exclusion induced by heavily unequal social structures. In the Indonesian context what this implies is using classroom time to critically engage with the English already in the local environment, for example in consumer product labels, billboard advertisements, popular TV programmes, magazines and songs. As Seargeant and Erling (2011) point out, the rapid expansion of the internet in Asian countries has the potential to democratise access to English and provide vastly increased opportunities for practice.
- From a self-psychological perspective, young people need to develop an ‘ideal L2 self’, such that they can one day imagine the possibility of ‘being an English speaker’ and using English socially, academically or professionally to their own advantage. There are many ways in which this could be done, but it argues against current policy moves towards streaming English language classes and establishing elite English medium schools as this potentially designates the excluded or lower-ranked students as future ‘non-users’ of English, with resultant demotivational effects.
- Teachers themselves need to become aware of prejudices they may carry towards pupils from a rural or urban poor background and resist the temptation to associate lack of early achievement in English with lack of potential to learn. A good starting point would be a recognition of the pupils’ existing language skills – especially where, as here, most are at least bilingual in a regional and national language by the time they reach puberty – and working together to analyse how they gained these skills. Further, use of diagrams like Figure 1 in training seminars could raise awareness about how teachers’ own behaviour may unwittingly contribute to the underachievement of some learners and about the need to create a more inclusive atmosphere in the class. This could be achieved by, for example, more use of the L1 to scaffold the learning of weaker pupils and by encouraging stronger pupils to work alongside weaker peers. The young people in this study were very conscious of how English could benefit their country as a whole; the learning of English has the potential to be a ‘class project’ rather than an individual pursuit, where all can take satisfaction from seeing less advanced pupils catching up with the majority.

## Notes

1. The conventional religious interpretation of the passage is that people who strive to make the most of their resources, both wealth and talents, will be properly rewarded while those who merely sit on what they have will lose even that. Presumably the interpretation may differ in non-capitalist societies. One respondent had moved to Jakarta so there were only 11 learners left.
2. Interviews were individual except for one pair of girls who preferred to be interviewed together.
3. The fourth 'less motivated' learner from the focal group presented a rather unusual case as he remained confident he would succeed in English in the long term, in spite of making little visible progress and being held back in the first year of school for persistent misbehaviour in class.
4. N's flat trajectory between 2004 and 2008 is slightly misleading as her turns in 2008 were much longer and she did not revert to Indonesian so often.
5. So prevalent did this strategic seating become that the school has recently introduced a policy of enforced rotation.
6. And in fact a 'strident' socio-cultural approach to motivation would not wish to separate the two (cf. Hickey 2003).

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