

‘Functional English’ Skills in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam:

Comparing English Ability and Use Among
15 Year Olds in Three Countries

Obiageri Bridget Azubuike, Gayatri Vaidya and Rhiannon Moore



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Summary

Increased globalisation, interconnectivity and overall exposure have promoted a considerable increase in developing countries in usage and aspiration to learn the English language. Among policymakers and individuals, English is considered important for economic advancement, employment and social mobility. In line with this, Young Lives included a 'functional English' assessment as part of its 2016-17 school survey with 15 year olds in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam, providing a unique opportunity to explore English language learning outcomes and some of the factors which affect these.

This working paper explores how functional English can be conceptualised, recognising the multiple ways in which young people in these diverse contexts may want to use English now and in the future. It also draws on analysis of data from the Young Lives school survey to consider the level of functional English competency which children in the three countries currently have, and how this relates to the types of English required by labour markets or higher levels of education. The paper examines the disparities in English levels within the three countries, including some of the background characteristics associated with higher levels of English, and discusses the implications of such gaps on the equality of education and employment opportunities in the future.

About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. www.younglives.org.uk

The views expressed are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, the University of Oxford, Young Lives, DFID or other funders.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

With increasing globalisation of business and services, and advanced technologies bringing growing interconnectivity, English is increasingly understood to be a means for global integration and economic advancement (Ngwi Focho 2011). There are growing demands from both individuals and policymakers for English as a global language; a common means of communication which allows individuals and companies to trade, share ideas and build economic links around the globe, as well as within multilingual countries and regions. As a result, many low- and middle-income countries are now investing considerable money and effort in building their population's capacity in the language (Euromonitor 2010).

Research suggests that English represents an aspirational language for many, with even those who currently have few opportunities to use English strongly believing that it will increase their opportunities for employment and further education in the future (Graddol 2010). Indeed, in many countries, English appears to have been internalised as a language of prestige and status, a sign of a good quality of education, '[reflecting] a strong belief in the power of English and desire to be one of the many who speak the language' (Erling 2014: 9).

In this context, this working paper uses data from a cross-country school effectiveness survey in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam to explore the role which English has in all three countries as a 'transferable skill' for adolescents, with potential relevance for continuing education, labour market opportunities and social mobility. It considers how English is constructed within each country, with a particular focus on 'functional English', and the implications of this for its use and perceived relevance across these diverse contexts.

The paper therefore aims to compare functional English skills within and between students in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam, in order to understand how the development of these skills reduces or widens inequalities among different groups of children in these countries. To do this, we use data from the Young Lives longitudinal study of childhood poverty which began in 2002 in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.¹

1.2. Research questions

This paper explores the extent to which 14-15-year-old students in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam develop and make use of functional English skills which are perceived to be of use in employment, higher education and social mobility. We examine the development and use of functional English skills by addressing two main research questions:

1. What types of functional English skills do students in the three countries have?
2. What are the characteristics of those who have a higher level of functional English skills? How do these vary between and within countries?

¹ For full discussion of the Young Lives data see Sections 3.1 and 3.2. Note that Peru is included in the wider Young Lives study, but is not discussed here due to differences in the design of the 2016-17 school survey.

2. Context

2.1. Conceptualising 'functional English'

In conceptualising 'functional English', we first look at the English language context in the three study countries.

2.1.1. *English in Ethiopia*

English is the medium of instruction for all secondary and higher education in Ethiopia and is taught as a subject from Grade 1 (Government of Ethiopia 1994). Part of the reason for teaching it from this early age is to ensure that students have sufficient opportunity to gain familiarity with the language which will become the medium of instruction if they progress to higher and more specialised levels of education (Government of Ethiopia 1994). Current national policy does not require English to be used as a medium of instruction for grades below secondary level, yet despite this it is used for all or some subjects (particularly maths and science) from upper primary onwards in a number of regions (Heugh et al. 2007).

The use of English at higher levels of education in Ethiopia has a political dimension in that it allows the use of a single language nationwide without association with a particular ethnic or language group. In a country comprised of many ethnic groups and around 80 different languages, where both ethnicity and language have been previous sources of conflict (Nekatibeb 2005), English represents a more 'neutral' common language which can be used between regions. In addition, it appears that English is increasingly becoming an aspirational language, seen by some to offer greater employment opportunities, particularly for those who want to travel within Ethiopia or internationally, or who want to compete within the global economy (IIE 2012; Heugh et al. 2007). Yet this view of English varies by region, with one study showing that, while parents in urban areas tended to prefer that their children learn in English or Amharic to enable them to seek the best employment, parents in rural areas felt it was more relevant for their children to learn in their mother tongue (Smith 2008).

Furthermore, it is notable that this aspirational perception of English appears *not* to be the one offered by a 2002 government policy document, which states that '[The] educational system should not produce youth, which, in its imagination, sees and yearns for the outside world and disregards its own country. [... The] benefits of globalization can be secured without mastery of the English language. Those countries, which have become highly developed and are now the major beneficiaries of globalization, use their own languages in their educational system rather than English' (Ministry of Education 2002: 40).

Despite this, it is reported that 'there is exceptionally high aspiration towards English [in Ethiopia] as a language of higher education (including teacher training) and as an international language that is associated with modernity and future success' (Heugh et al. 2007: 6). However, there appears to be a considerable gap between this aspiration and the on-the-ground reality, which limits the extent to which those studying English in school can become familiar with the language. As Heugh et al. (2007) describe, 'English is not a language which is widely used across Ethiopian society. It is seldom, if ever, used in everyday life activities. It is only used for very limited functions in high levels of government, higher education and for international trade and diplomacy. It is a foreign language rather than a second language in Ethiopia.' (Heugh et al. 2007: 127). As a result, outside of Addis

Ababa and other urban centres, 'Ethiopian English learners and teachers have neither opportunity nor authentic purpose for "target language use"' (Birbirso 2014: 17), and as a result the standard of English teaching in government schools is reported to be very low (Heugh et al. 2007; Cohen 2005).

In Ethiopia, therefore, it appears that English has relevance for a small proportion of the population working (or hoping to work in the future) in tourism, in some government sectors or with technology, yet for the vast majority of the population it is perhaps seen to have little functionality in everyday life. The main motivation for learning English for most seems to be because it is used as a medium of instruction in secondary and higher education, and because it is the language of exams, rather than a language which has relevance in and of itself outside of education.

2.1.2. *English in India*

English has a long history in India and appears in recent years to have largely overcome its colonial legacy and its perceived position as a language of the elite. Increasingly it seems that English is presented as a language of neutrality in a country with 22 official languages, one which can enable communication between regions, and which can help people overcome social disadvantage and achieve social mobility (Rao 2013; Meganathan 2015). As an 'associate official language' of the country, it is suggested that English allows for greater communication within India (i.e. between states with different languages) (Graddol 2010) as well as with the wider world. Yet the increasing prominence of English in education and employment runs the risk of further deepening divisions between those who do and do not know English, which often fall along the lines of other kinds of existing disadvantage (Graddol 2010; Meganathan 2015).

English language proficiency appears to now be perceived as a 'basic skill' in India, one which it is thought that all children need to learn if they are to participate in the global economy (Graddol 2010). As a result, 26 states now introduce English language study from Grade 1 (Meganathan 2015), and it is a compulsory part of the national 'three language formula'.² In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (where the Young Lives study takes place), learning English is compulsory from Grade 3 (MHRD 2014). Although in the past English-medium instruction was seen as the domain of private schools only, government schools in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are increasingly offering English-medium education, often in the form of parallel English and Telugu streams within one school (Government of Andhra Pradesh 2014): perhaps as an attempt to stem the massive numbers of children moving from government schools to the private sector. Yet there is a great deal of variation in how English is taught in India, both as a subject and as a medium of instruction, much of which reflects the diversity and inequalities inherent within the wider education system (Rao 2013).

As a compulsory school subject, English is presented as a subject for the masses (many of whom are first-generation learners), yet it is taught by teachers have rarely received training in teaching English as a foreign language, and who are struggling to complete an overambitious curriculum focusing on grammar and dense texts with little relevance to the everyday lives of the children they teach (Meganathan 2015). Furthermore, studies suggest

² Under the 1968 National Education Policy, students in India are required to study three languages: their regional language, another modern Indian language (generally Hindi, if this is not the state language), and English. This is known as the 'three language formula'.

that many teachers have little confidence or proficiency in teaching English, particularly in rural areas (Meganathan 2015), and so tend to teach most lessons in the regional language even when English is the subject being taught.

With the growth of the service sector and increased need to communicate across state and country borders, English communication skills have also become increasingly important for employment (Graddol 2010). A World Bank report (2010) found that there are high returns to English language skills in the Indian labour market, with fluency in English increasing the hourly wage (for a male worker) by 34 per cent compared to those who speak no English – as high as the increase for completing secondary school, and half as much as that for an undergraduate degree.

It therefore appears that English is at risk of becoming a subject which further exacerbates existing inequalities. Many children from better-off families have the dual benefit of attending private English-medium schools and participating in after-school private tuition in English. In addition, those living in urban areas have greater exposure to English, including English-medium advertisements, newspapers, internet and other popular media. Meanwhile those in rural communities or from poorer families have little regular exposure to English outside school – as Graddol (2010) describes, the further you travel from a main road, the less you will hear or see English. Despite this, English remains an aspirational language: 'every parent in India today wants to send his/her child to an English medium school' (Meganathan 2015: 57) so they can achieve what is perceived as a 'better' life.

2.1.3. *English in Vietnam*

In 2011, the study of English as a foreign language became a compulsory part of the Vietnamese school curriculum from Grade 3 (Nguyen and Bui 2016). As a key element of the National Foreign Language Project 2020, launched in 2008, competence in English is now promoted 'aggressively' (Nguyen et al. 2016: 193) as a basic skill which policymakers anticipate students need to possess for further study, employment and leisure (MOET 2012). The revised 'Project 2020' English curriculum focuses on communicative capability and is linked closely to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), with the intention that children develop English language skills which are useful and relevant inside and outside the classroom (MOET 2012).

English has been gaining increasing prominence in Vietnam for the last three decades as the country has become more open (Le 2011; Nguyen et al. 2016). Building the nation's capacity in English appears to be perceived as a prerequisite for Vietnam to gain competitiveness in the global economy (Nguyen et al. 2016), with English the designated language of international communication within the ASEAN bloc and World Trade Organization, both of which Vietnam has joined since adopting a market economy (Canh and Barnard 2009). For this reason, one of the aims of Project 2020 is 'to boost the English proficiency of Vietnamese youth and serve the cause of industrialisation and modernisation for the country' (Nguyen and Bui 2016: 90).

English therefore seems to have gained the status of an aspirational language in Vietnam fairly recently, perceived by parents to be key to allowing their children access to greater opportunities in the future (Nguyen et al. 2016). As a result, private English tuition is a booming industry, with language centres offering a wealth of English classes for children and adults to suit a range of budgets. English is increasingly required for the workplace, for study abroad and for interacting with the increasing numbers of foreign visitors; it has therefore

moved from being perceived as solely a school-based subject to something with real-life relevance (Le 2011). However, in government schools the standard of English teaching is reported to be very low (Nguyen et al. 2016; Nguyen and Bui 2016; Canh 2000), with teachers having little experience of teaching English and lacking confidence in their own ability to use the language. English classes in government schools reportedly remain teacher-centric and textbook led, with students having little opportunity for the practical use of 'real English' (Nguyen et al. 2016: 206). Formal assessment of English in the school system focuses on knowledge of the language (for example, testing grammatical structures) rather than ability to communicate, with speaking and listening assessments very rare (Nguyen and Bui 2016; Canh and Barnard 2009).

The reportedly low standard of English teaching in government schools and the focus of the national examinations represents a clear departure from the communicative vision of the new curriculum, as well as from the perceived needs of learners (and their families) (Nguyen et al. 2016). As a result, those children whose families can afford it are turning to private English language centres where they often learn in smaller classes, taught by a mixture of Vietnamese and native English-speaking teachers, and where a wider range of teaching materials are used (Nguyen et al. 2016; Le 2011). There appears to be a tension between the aims of Project 2020 – to provide access to English language for all students – and the outcomes, as English proficiency becomes a means through which social divisions between those who can afford private tuition and those who can't are increasingly entrenched.

In addition, for many students outside the large urban areas, English remains something which has little relevance to their everyday lives. In more rural areas, English classes are a 'cultural island' (Canh 2000: 74), the only setting in which, three times a week, students will be exposed to English and required to use it. For these students, the motivation to learn English is therefore not to gain greater employment opportunities or access higher levels of study, but instead is because it is a compulsory school subject (Canh and Barnard 2009). As Nguyen and Bui (2016) show, teachers in one remote area of Vietnam reported that the increasing focus on English was further disadvantaging their students (from ethnic-minority backgrounds), not only because it had little relevance to them and their everyday life, but because it was taking time away from other subjects which they might have more use for. 'In the view of the teachers, the current policy seems to offer promises to a proportion of students but closes doors for the remainder of the country's minority youth' (Nguyen and Bui 2016: 93).

2.1.4. *English language context in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam*

There are considerable differences in how English is perceived in the three study countries, but also some similarities. In all three countries, English is studied in school – we assume that all of the children in our survey will have been studying it as a subject for a number of years. But in all the countries there are also concerns about the quality of English language teaching, particularly in rural areas where teachers and students have less exposure to English outside the classroom. It also seems that, in at least some of the areas we survey in the three countries, English is seen as an aspirational language, perceived to offer greater employment and educational opportunities. This appears to be particularly the case in India and Vietnam, but also perhaps for a smaller number of children in larger urban areas in Ethiopia as well. As a result, it will be important to understand not only students' level of performance in English, but also their exposure to English and their perception of its relevance for them and their lives. A final similarity appears to be that proficiency in English

has become another means through which the gap between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds is further emphasised; something which will become increasingly entrenched if English continues to become important as a means for accessing employment and educational opportunities in the future.

2.2. Measuring ‘functional English’

As part of the Young Lives school surveys in 2016-17, we included English language assessments to measure the ‘functional English’ skills possessed by students in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam. In all three countries the overall perceptions of English are as a transferable skill for continuing education and employment opportunities. While students are exposed to English in varying contexts across the three countries (both within and beyond school), the language is seen as increasingly relevant by both policymakers and individuals. For this reason, the construct assessed in the Young Lives English tests is ‘functional English’, defined as the: ‘application of ... skills in purposeful contexts and scenarios that reflect real-life situations’ (OFQUAL 2011: 10).

Functional English equips students with the necessary understanding of English for use in everyday life. As a transferable skill (skills which can be applied across a range of activities or work), functional English as a tool helps students transition to higher education and the labour market, also providing them with the means to partake in globalisation beyond their national borders. Through greater exposure to the internet and other IT developments, the ‘transferability’ of English is increased, as students are able to both use and sharpen their English language skills. However, exposure to these developments and to other opportunities to use English differ by country, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. *Exposure to different types of potential English learning situations in each country*

Ethiopia	India	Vietnam
English as a medium of instruction (MOI) in school (secondary/higher secondary)	English as a MOI in school (private schools/English-medium government schools)	
English as a subject in school	English as a subject in school	English as a subject in school
Private tuition in English	Private tuition in English	Private tuition in English
	Exposure to English at home and in local community <i>e.g. talking to parents, siblings, friends, neighbours</i>	Exposure to English at home and in local community <i>e.g. talking to parents, siblings, friends, neighbours</i>
Informal life experience <i>e.g. reading English magazines, watching English TV, using the internet in English</i>	Informal life experience <i>e.g. reading English magazines, watching English TV, using the internet in English</i>	Informal life experience <i>e.g. reading English magazines, watching English TV, using the internet in English</i>

Key: = All/almost all children = Some children, particularly those in urban areas = A small number of children

Table 1 reflects the need to produce an assessment which is meaningful for children from a diverse range of backgrounds, both between the study countries and also within them (for example, between those in urban and rural environments). In this sense, the English tests diverge somewhat from the school curriculum in the three study countries, as they measure students’ ability to use English in ways which could have functional relevance for them now

or in their future. Due to the practical and logistical considerations of conducting a large-scale survey, the test comprises multiple-choice questions – a limitation which means that it only captures language knowledge and reading skills, which are just one dimension of the functional English construct.³

The Young Lives English tests are loosely aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) developed by the Council of Europe (2001). This framework defines six levels of language proficiency (known as the Common Reference Levels) based on what learners are able to do, ranging from A1 (most basic) to C2 (most advanced). The Young Lives 2016-17 school survey English test assessed four English language skill domains (Table 2) which reflect the ways in which students in the study countries currently use English or may need to do so in the future. The tests were developed following a process of pre-pilot and pilot testing in each country (Azubuike et al. 2017), with emphasis given first, to the development of tests which allowed detailed analysis for each individual country, and second to the inclusion of items which link the tests for Ethiopia, India and Vietnam. This enables data from the three countries to be analysed on a common scale, providing the opportunity for cross-country comparisons.

2.3. Functional English assessment development

2.3.1. Summary of test development process

As the overall student exposure to English was different for each country, we created a broad skill-wise framework to capture a range of functional English language skills. The framework focused on various skills and was also loosely checked for covering the CEFR spectrum, though not strictly mapped to it.

The functional English paper covered skills and sub-skills which focused on English as a language for its utility for communication purposes. Questions testing the correct technical and grammatical understanding of English were consciously not included. Although the cohort taking the tests were all 14-15 years old, the test design accommodated questions with a wide range of difficulties. This aimed to address anticipated differences in English abilities within and between countries, and to also assess and categorise children as to their basic, medium and advanced mastery levels. Hence, the assessment tool was not linked to scholastic grades.

The words and vocabulary testing questions focused on common words and contextual meanings that are used in daily contexts. Grammar and sentence construction questions were also more targeted to communication, and to students' ability to answer a question, or to identify the possible question for a given answer. To support the cross-country design of the study, questions using English idioms or other language structures which were more country specific were not included. The reading and comprehension sections included passages from different types of text, ranging from a story to a factual passage and a pamphlet, to explore functional ability to comprehend different types of information in daily life.

³ See Iyer and Moore (2017) for further details of the conceptualisation and measurement of functional English in the school surveys.

Table 2. *Functional English skills domain, sub-skills and test item percentage for each skills domain*

Skill	Sub-skills	Skill-wise distribution (%) ⁴
Word identification	Identifies simpler and common words for objects/birds/animals	10-20
	Identification of familiar but unseen common objects/birds/animals	
	Identifies words on the basis of description given	
Word meaning knowledge and contextual vocabulary	Understands the meanings of given words	20-40
	Understands the meaning and accordingly picks up synonym, antonym for the given sentence	
	Understands contextual meanings of the words	
	Understands appropriate phrases	
Sentence comprehension and construction	Completes the sentence meaningfully	20-30
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pronouns • Verbs • Adjective, adverbs • Conjunctions • Contextual completion of sentence 	
	Uses appropriate grammatical concepts to complete the sentence	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time • Gender • Aspect • Sentence transformation (speech, voice, rephrasing) 	
	Combines sentences	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using appropriate conjunction 	
	Comprehends the sentence	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies incomplete sentence from complete sentence • Understands various types of sentences (simple, complex, combined, interrogative, etc.) • Identifies the correct rephrased sentence having the same meaning as the sentence in question. 	
	Comprehends sentences and arranges them in appropriate order of events	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue-based comprehension • Story-based comprehension 	
Reading and comprehension	Reading and comprehension: direct facts	30-50
	Reading and comprehension: implicit facts and inferences	

A pilot test was conducted in each country using a 60-item paper, with questions largely focusing on the functional aspects of language, rather than on technical correctness or grade-level mastery of each skill. The questions were intended to be relevant to the real-life application situations which a student is likely to encounter. The length of the final test paper varied; in India, students answered a 50-item test while in Vietnam and Ethiopia the test comprised 40 items. Common test items were administered across the three countries to enable cross-country comparisons.

4 Skill-wise distribution of questions was not identical across the three countries, and varied according to pre-pilot and pilot testing results. The percentages here show the range used across the three countries.

3. Data and methodology

3.1. Young Lives

Young Lives is an international longitudinal study which has collected data at the household level from 12,000 children in four low- and middle-income countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam) since 2002. In each country, the sample consists of around 2,000 children who were born in 2000-01 (the 'Younger Cohort') and around 1,000 children born in 1994-95 (the 'Older Cohort'). To date, five rounds of data collection have been completed, each gathering detailed information on the background characteristics of each child, household, and community. In addition, Young Lives has collected longitudinal qualitative data on a sub-sample of children from each cohort, and school-level data on Young Lives children and their peers through primary school surveys conducted between 2010 and 2013 (Boyden and James 2014) and secondary school surveys conducted in 2016-17.

In each country, Young Lives has 20 study sites, semi-purposively selected to ensure a pro-poor sample which demonstrates socio-economic, geographic and demographic diversity (Rolleston et al. 2013). In each site, 50 Older Cohort children and 100 Younger Cohort children were randomly selected from households with children of the required age, providing a sample which is representative at the site level.

3.2. Young Lives school effectiveness study

In 2010, Young Lives introduced a series of school surveys in each country to explore in more depth the role which formal schooling played in the lives of Young Lives children and their peers (Boyden and James 2014). Between 2010 and 2013 the school surveys examined issues of school quality and effectiveness in primary schools in sites in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam.

In 2016-17, Young Lives conducted a further round of school effectiveness surveys in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and Vietnam.⁵ Building upon the design of the primary school surveys, the 2016-17 surveys examine school effectiveness at upper primary level in Ethiopia (Grades 7 and 8), and at secondary level in India and Vietnam (Grade 9 and Grade 10, respectively).⁶

The school effectiveness survey design used assumes that there are school-based factors which impact on student learning outcomes, and that these can be separated from other effects such as prior attainment and educational background (Reynolds et al. 2011). In school effectiveness research, students are tested at the beginning and end of the school year, with common link items between the two tests, to provide a measure of student progress (James 2013) and of the 'value added' by schools (Rolleston et al. 2013). The collection of background data at student, teacher and school level can also be used to explore some of the factors which are linked to student learning.

5 A secondary school survey was also conducted in Peru in 2016-17, using a different design.

6 See Rossiter (2016), Moore (2016), and Iyer (2016) for further details on the survey design in each country.

The 2016-17 school surveys examine school effectiveness through multiple outcome measures, including students' learning progress in maths and functional English. This involved the administration of maths and functional English tests at the beginning and end of the school year (Wave 1 and Wave 2 of data collection, respectively) in order to assess students' learning progress in these domains. Unlike maths, which has been tested by Young Lives in previous school survey rounds and in the household survey in all Young Lives countries, this was the first time Young Lives tested English across multiple countries, reflecting its increasing importance as a perceived 'transferable skill' relevant for the labour market and higher educational options for 15-year-old children in these three countries.

3.3. Methodology

In benchmarking students' proficiency levels for this paper, student test data was cleaned and scored, with items labelled 0 or 1 for each student if they answered incorrectly or correctly, respectively. Item response theory (IRT) analysis was then used to analyse the data to produce a score for each student. IRT is a model that attempts to explain the relationship between latent traits (unobservable attributes) and their manifestations (observed outcomes or performance). The latent trait modelling approach employed in all cases here is the 2-parameter IRT model (see Moore et al. 2017: 39-41). These models were implemented using the IRT suite of commands in STATA 14. After extracting latent scores for each student using IRT, we conducted the scale anchoring of the test items using the following methods.

Putting items onto the same scale: Because of common anchor items between countries and waves, we can put the three country tests on a common, comparable scale using IRT. This means that 1 point of learning on this scale means the same thing in Ethiopia, India or Vietnam, so we can compare starting score, ending score, and progress. We scaled the test scores to have a mean of 500 and standard deviations of 100 to aid interpretability, in line with other international assessments such as PISA and TIMSS.⁷

Using this for scale anchoring: We then identified three levels of performance on the test – basic, competent and advanced – based on students' scores on the common IRT scale. At the 'basic' level were students who scored between 385-415 (i.e. around 1 standard deviation below the mean); students at 'competent' level were those who scored between 485-515 (i.e. those close to the mean); and students at advanced level were those who scored 585-615 (i.e. 1 standard deviation above the mean). This means that not all students are included within the level bands – some students will be below Level 1, between Levels 1-2 or 2-3, or above Level 3. These levels have been identified to be indicative of performance at that particular point on the IRT scale.

Next, we identified the percentage correct performance on each Wave 1 test item for each level; for example, on one item, Level 1 students might have scored 35 per cent, while Level 2 students scored 60 per cent. In order to allocate each test item to one particular level (i.e. basic, competent or proficient), we used a 50 per cent correct benchmark. This meant that the lowest level where at least 50 per cent of the students got the item correct became the overall level for that item. We also identified key characteristics for each item, for example,

⁷ PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) are international assessments of students who are 15 years old (PISA) or in Grade 4 and 8 (TIMSS). They provide cross-country comparable data on a large scale which are intended to evaluate participating education systems.

skills required, types of vocabulary needed, and so on, and used this to come up with a description of what students can do at each level.

Lastly, we added this onto a kernel density graph which allows us to examine how students in each country are represented at each level. We then examined the characteristics of students at each level, for example, where they are based, their socio-economic status and parental literacy, to add context and allow us to interpret the findings more meaningfully.

4. Analysis and findings

4.1. Functional English proficiency benchmarking

We administered common items to students across the three countries that act as anchor items on the English test, so we are able to place students on the same scale to examine their performance on the test. Figure 1 shows the cross-country student performance on the English test.

Figure 1. *Distribution of functional English language scores across the three countries*

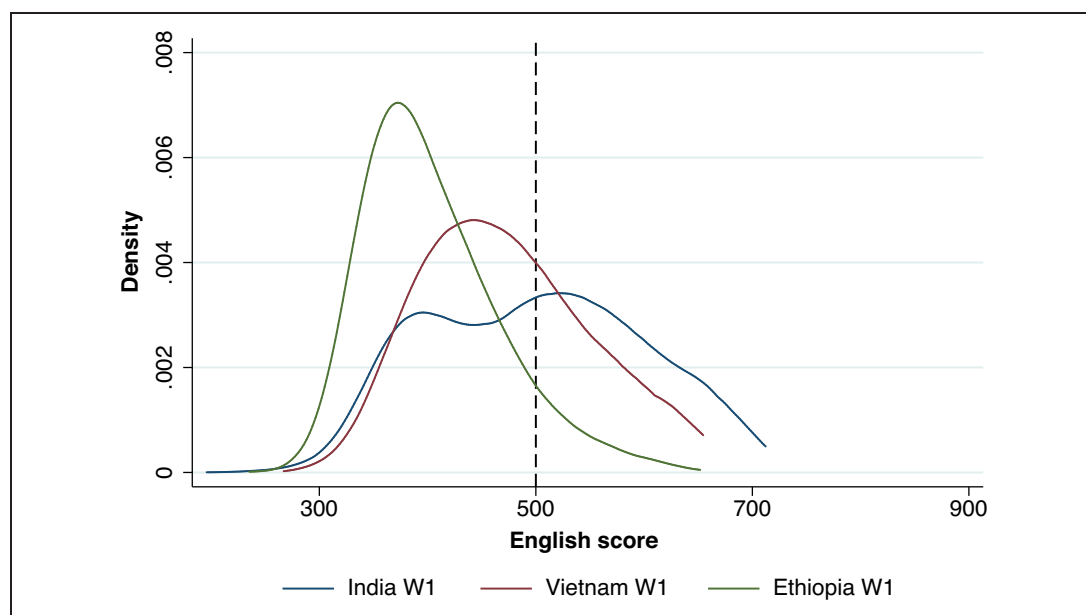
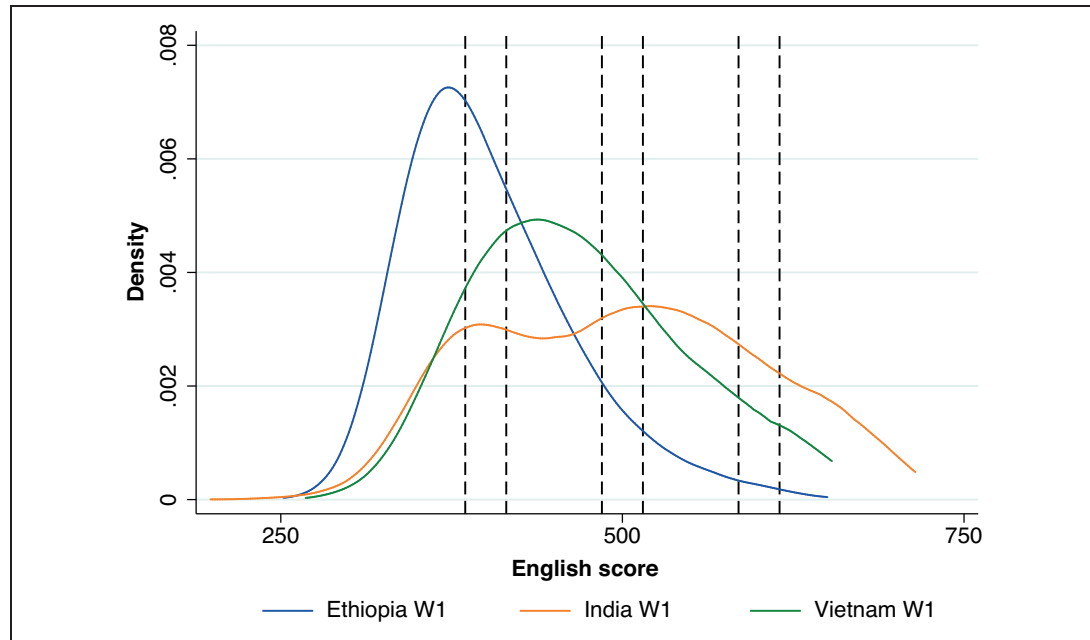


Figure 1 shows that students in Ethiopia are situated mainly to the left of the mean of the distribution. Students in India score higher on average than their counterparts in the other two countries; the average score for students in Ethiopia was 402 points, and was 469 points for Vietnamese students, and 500 points for Indian students.⁸ However, we still see significant levels of overlap across the three countries, which indicates that there are some

⁸ In this cross-country scaled dataset, India is the highest-scoring country, with an average score in Wave 1 of 500. Perhaps counterintuitively, this is the same as the mean for the entire dataset. This is due to the application of sampling weights (required to ensure the data are representative at the site level in each country), which mean that each child in the India sample is given relatively more weight when the distribution of data is summarised, particularly at higher ability levels where children in the India sample were relatively under-sampled.

students in Ethiopia who score considerably high on the test and have similar scores to students in India and Vietnam.

Figure 2. *Proficiency benchmarking levels across the three countries*



When we include the proficiency bands with the test score distribution as shown in Figure 2, we see that a larger proportion of students in Ethiopia fall into the basic level of functional English skills based on our assessment. Students in Vietnam and India can also be found at the basic level, but there are more Ethiopian students in this category. This could be linked back to our discussion around Table 1 about the relatively lower need for, and exposure to, English language for Ethiopian students, compared to the other two countries. At the competent level, the green curve which represents students in Vietnam is above the other two curves (Ethiopia and India), indicating that there are more Vietnamese students at this level. Lastly, at the proficient functional English level between 585 and 615, more students in India can be found than in the other two countries, according to our assessment. There are students from each country across all three proficiency levels, but with variations in numbers, demonstrating that even within countries inequalities exist in the development of functional English skills between students. This is particularly the case in India, where the distribution of scores is very broad, and appears bimodal, reflecting in part the stratified sampling approach used in India.⁹ Figure 1 provides an overview of within and between country inequalities in the development of functional English skills, indicating (among other things) the difference in home background of students, the types of school they attend, and the overall investment in their education and skills development.

Not all students in the three countries can be captured in the data because we have restricted the measurement to three proficiency bands, as discussed in Section 3. Across the three countries, 29,555 students had appropriate English test scores for inclusion in this

⁹ See Section 4.3 for further details.

analysis (and are represented in the kernel density graphs above), but only 7,945 fell within the three proficiency levels design for this paper. However, very similar numbers of students across the three countries were captured in the exercise.

Table 2. *Numbers of students in each proficiency band in each country*

Country	Level 1 – Basic	Level 2 – Competent	Level 3 – Proficient	Total
Ethiopia	2182	528	87	2797
India	1465	842	339	2646
Vietnam	1337	920	245	2502
Total	4984	2290	671	7945

Table 2 shows how students in each country are distributed into each of the three proficiency bands.¹⁰ Overall across all three countries, there are more students at the basic level than at the competent and proficient functional English skills level. As seen in Figure 2, more students in Ethiopia have Level 1 functional English skills (basic), while more Vietnamese students are at the competent functional English skills level and more Indian students are located at the proficient level.

4.2. What types of functional English skills and misconceptions do students have?

To interpret these findings further, we examine what skills are required at each proficiency level of the functional English test (Table 3). This gives us an idea of what the students can do and the functional English skills they have developed across the three countries.

Table 3. *Summary of skills required at each level based on types of items mastered by students*

<p>Level 1 – Basic: At this level, students are able to identify everyday vocabulary from pictures relating to clothing, body parts, job titles, places and spatial location (e.g. bag, doctor, mountain). They can also identify simple antonyms (e.g. big/small, start/stop). They can comprehend simple sentences and select the correct answer to complete a short question/answer dialogue written in the present tense.</p>
<p>Level 2 – Competent: At this level, students can identify appropriate question words (e.g. where, when, how) to complete a simple question/answer dialogue. They can comprehend simple descriptions of a character and identify suitable verbs and adjectives to complete sentences about them (e.g. lazy, eat, slow). They can identify job titles and everyday items using simple written descriptions. Students can read short simple passages on concrete themes (e.g. animals) and identify specific information which is directly written in the passage. They can also make simple inferences using what is written in the passage.</p>
<p>Level 3 – Proficient: At this level, students can identify less commonly used vocabulary (or antonyms/synonyms) from a short written description (e.g. whisper, competitors). They can also identify the meaning of unfamiliar words based on the context in which they have been used (e.g. scarce, arduous, excellent). Students can read and comprehend more complex short texts containing abstract themes (e.g. trying to play a trick on someone) and can make inferences about purpose and intent of characters based on comprehension of the entire text.</p>

¹⁰ Note, however, that this does not account for the application of sampling weights, which have been used in Figures 1 and 2.

For students who selected the wrong answers to specific test items, we carried out misconception analysis to understand the composition of the test items and the underlying reasons students could perhaps have failed to pick the right answer. The overall misconception analysis of the language papers highlights two major skills – ‘comprehension’ and ‘vocabulary’ – as the weaker skills. Comprehension was tested in the form of a story, descriptive text or graphics for which the students had to answer questions ranging from recall, to inference, to deduction of facts. Questions based on the recall of facts stated in the passages were where students showed higher performance, but questions testing implicit information were where students struggled. In terms of vocabulary, when the focus moved from questions testing word knowledge to questions testing the contextual application of this knowledge, students seem to struggle in comprehending the sentences and the given context. To provide examples of this analysis, Table 4 outlines a few misconceptions that were highlighted across the countries.

Table 4. *Examples of misconception analysis for selected test questions*

<p>Question 11, Vietnam</p> <p>11 One who teaches in a school is a _____.</p> <p>A cook B student C teacher D potter</p>	<p>Graph</p> <p>The graph plots 'Percentage correct on this item' (0-100) against 'Student ability level' (4-40). Option C (50% correct) shows a steady increase from ~10% at level 4 to 100% at level 40. Option B (42% correct) peaks at ~65% around level 16 and then drops to 0% by level 28. Option A (3% correct) and Option D (3% correct) remain near 0% across all ability levels.</p>								
<p>Performance %</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th>Option A</th> <th>Option B</th> <th>Option C</th> <th>Option D</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>3.7</td> <td style="background-color: #f08080;">42.2</td> <td style="background-color: #90ee90;">50.2</td> <td>3.5</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D	3.7	42.2	50.2	3.5
Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D						
3.7	42.2	50.2	3.5						
<p>Misconception analysis</p> <p>The question tests whether students can complete the sentence using a contextually appropriate word. Though 50.2 per cent of students chose option C as the correct answer, a significant number, 42 per cent, chose incorrect option B.</p> <p>The option B ‘student’ and option C ‘teacher’ both are words that can be used in the context of teaching. However, here students have to identify a contextually appropriate word that answers the question in the sentence. Students who chose option B seem to have selected the word ‘school’ from the question and looked for an answer that matches the same context. Since ‘student’ appears first in the list, they seem to have gone with it. They also might have got confused between the words ‘teach’ and ‘learn’. As can be seen from the IRC graph, the percentage selecting incorrect option B decreases as the ability level increases.</p>									

The following two questions relate to the poster below:

CONTEST

Do you ever daydream?
 Do you let your mind make magic?
 Do you think you are... maybe a little ant?
 Maybe an astronaut whizzing through space?
 If you have, quick! Write us a poem!
 It should start with –
When I close my eyes, I think
I think I am...
 Remember – The poem should be your own.
 It should NOT be more than 10 lines long.

Please write your name, age and address on the post card. Send it in by 30 May, 2012.

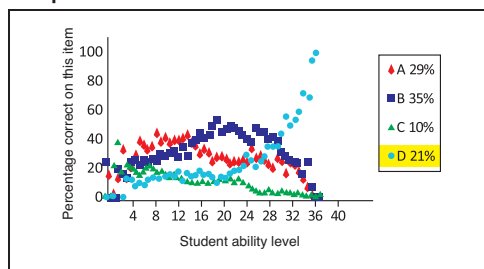
Illustrated by Arvinder

Question 47, India

47 The poem should be _____.

- A long
- B funny
- C copied
- D original

Graph



Performance %

Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
29.7	35.2	10.3	21.1

Misconception analysis

The question tests the ability of the students to infer the answer based on a notice, with 35.2 per cent selecting incorrect option B and 21.1 per cent correct option D. Students who picked 'long' as the answer most likely did so as it appears in the poster, without fully reading or understanding the context. Another reason why students picked 'funny' as the correct answer could be that they interpret the examples mentioned in the poster as 'funny' – like being an ant, for instance. Words like 'funny' and 'long' are also comparatively easier words to read and comprehend than 'copied' or 'original'. Furthermore, in this question option D is mentioned implicitly in the passage but the word is not used directly. The question requires students to analyse the information and make logical deductions based on it, and most students were unable to do so.

Question 36, Ethiopia and Vietnam

36 What other information, that is **MISSING** in the poster, is needed to send an entry?

A how to send your entry
B where to send your entry
C when to send your entry
D what to send as your entry

Performance %

Country	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
Ethiopia	33.8	26.2	18	21.4

Graph

The graph for Ethiopia shows the percentage of students who selected each option based on their ability level. The x-axis represents the student ability level from 4 to 40, and the y-axis represents the percentage correct on this item from 0 to 100. Option A (red diamonds) starts at approximately 80% for low ability and decreases to about 10% for high ability. Option B (yellow squares) starts at approximately 10% for low ability and increases to about 100% for high ability. Option C (green triangles) starts at approximately 20% for low ability and decreases to about 10% for high ability. Option D (blue circles) starts at approximately 10% for low ability and increases to about 10% for high ability.

Performance %

Country	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
Vietnam	29.7	24.9	24.1	20.8

Graph

The graph for Vietnam shows the percentage of students who selected each option based on their ability level. The x-axis represents the student ability level from 4 to 40, and the y-axis represents the percentage correct on this item from 0 to 100. Option A (red diamonds) starts at approximately 25% for low ability and decreases to about 10% for high ability. Option B (yellow squares) starts at approximately 10% for low ability and increases to about 100% for high ability. Option C (green triangles) starts at approximately 20% for low ability and decreases to about 10% for high ability. Option D (blue circles) starts at approximately 10% for low ability and increases to about 10% for high ability.

Misconception analysis

The question tests the ability of the students to infer the answer based on a notice. In Vietnam, 29.7 per cent of students chose incorrect option A and 24.9 per cent chose correct option B, whereas in Ethiopia 33.8 per cent of students chose incorrect option A. This is indicative of the fact that students tend to choose the answer that is specifically mentioned in the passage from which question is asked. Moreover, option A is explicitly mentioned in the passage but option B is not. Students do not seem to analyse the text and make logical deductions based on this analysis. Also, students struggle with questions like 'what is missing' or 'what is not there' as they don't seem to comprehend what is being asked. Students need to analyse the text and try to identify the missing piece in the big puzzle. The IRC graph shows that with increasing ability level, the percentage of students selecting options A and C decreases.

4.3. What are the characteristics of children at different proficiency levels?

To further expand on this analysis, we examine the characteristics of students in the different proficiency levels to understand the extent to which their background characteristics are associated with their functional English language skills.

Figure 3. *Distribution of functional English language scores by wealth across the three countries*

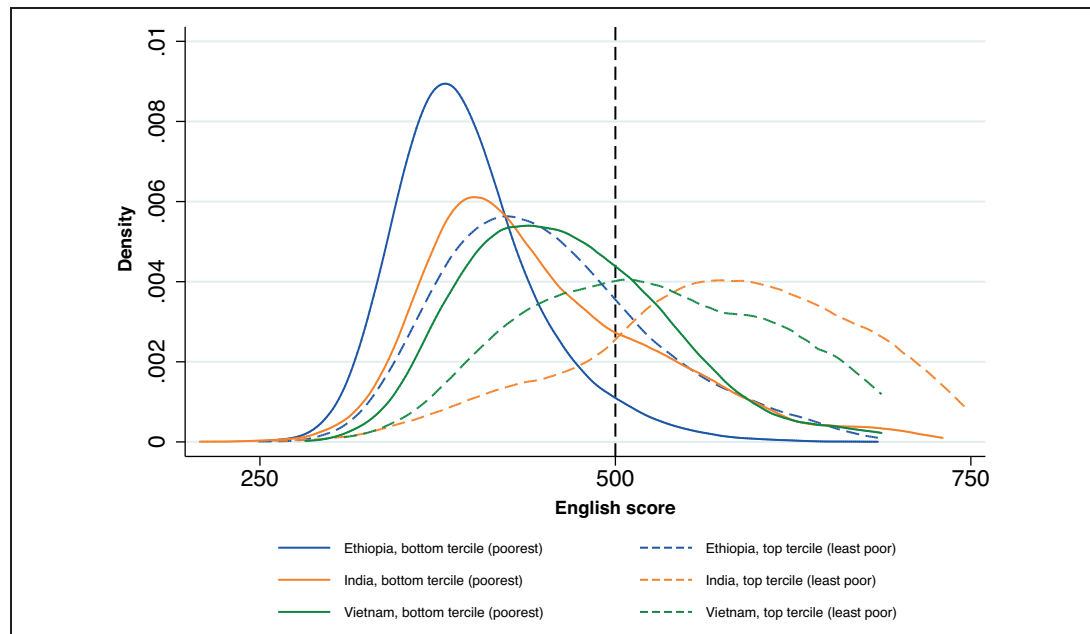


Figure 3 shows the distances between the performance curves of students who fall into the least poor (wealth index top tercile) category and those in the poorest (wealth index bottom tercile). Poorer students scored lower than their least-poor colleagues in all three countries, and their curves are to the left of the distribution, which also means they are more likely to be found in the lower levels of functional English proficiency. One major difference in the distribution in Figure 3 is between the mean score of students in the poorest category and least poor category in India, where the gap is more extreme than that in the other two countries. This indicates that wealth matters for functional English skills across the three countries, but more so in India. While this may reflect national differences, it may also relate in part to the sampling approach used in the school surveys. In India, a stratified sampling approach was used, sampling children from four school management types (Private Aided, Private Unaided, State Government and Tribal/Social Welfare) (see Moore 2016). The extreme inequality of scores seen in India may therefore partly reflect this approach, with the bimodal distribution in the data representing differences between children in different types of schools rather than being truly representative of inequalities within the Young Lives sites in India. In Ethiopia and Vietnam, where a census sampling approach was used (see Rossiter 2016; and Iyer 2016, respectively) this is less likely to be a concern.

4.3.1. *Country specific characteristics of children at different proficiency levels*

We also analyse country specific differences in the characteristics of students at the three proficiency bands. In Ethiopia (Figure 4), there is no strong distinction between boys and girls at the three levels of functional English proficiency. However, wealth, locality and parental literacy matters. Wealthier students are more likely to be in Level 3 (proficient), with all Level 3 students attending schools in urban localities in Ethiopia; and with regards to parental literacy, the majority of students at the proficient level have literate parents.

Figure 4. Ethiopia – Differences in the background characteristics of students at each level of functional English proficiency

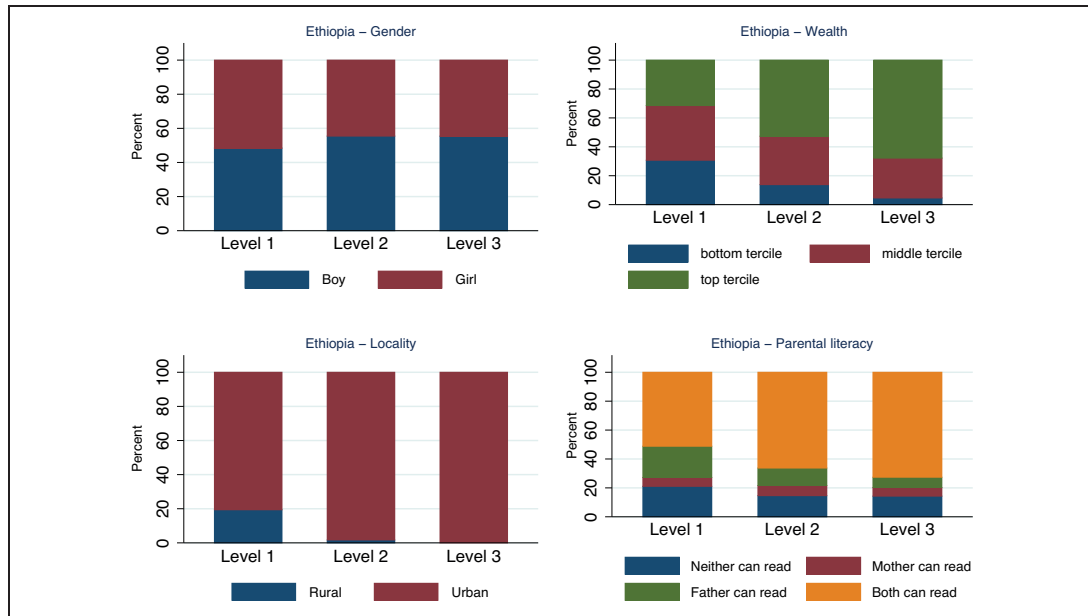
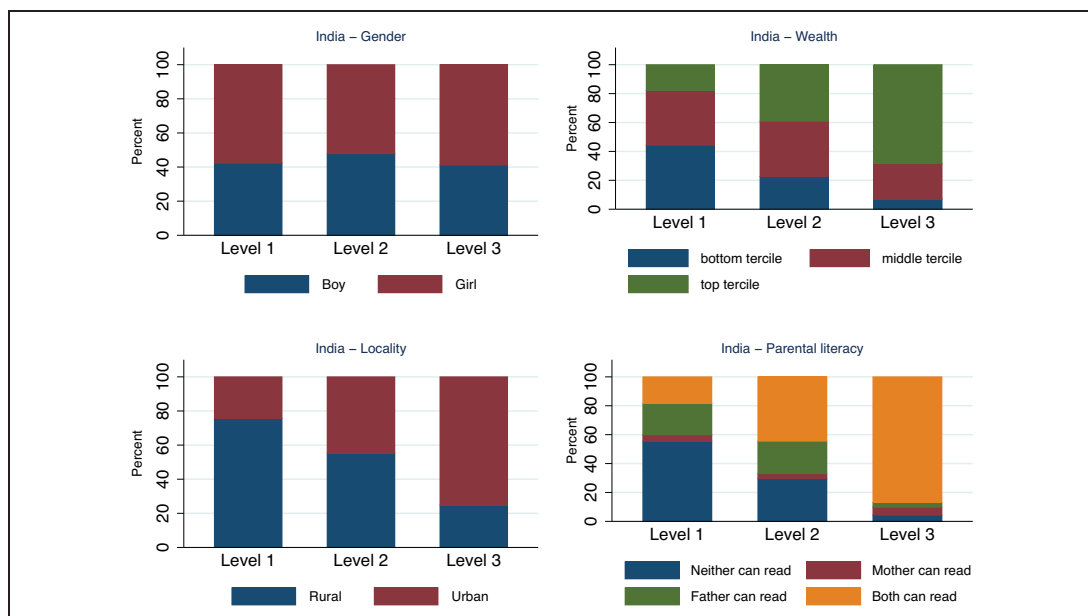


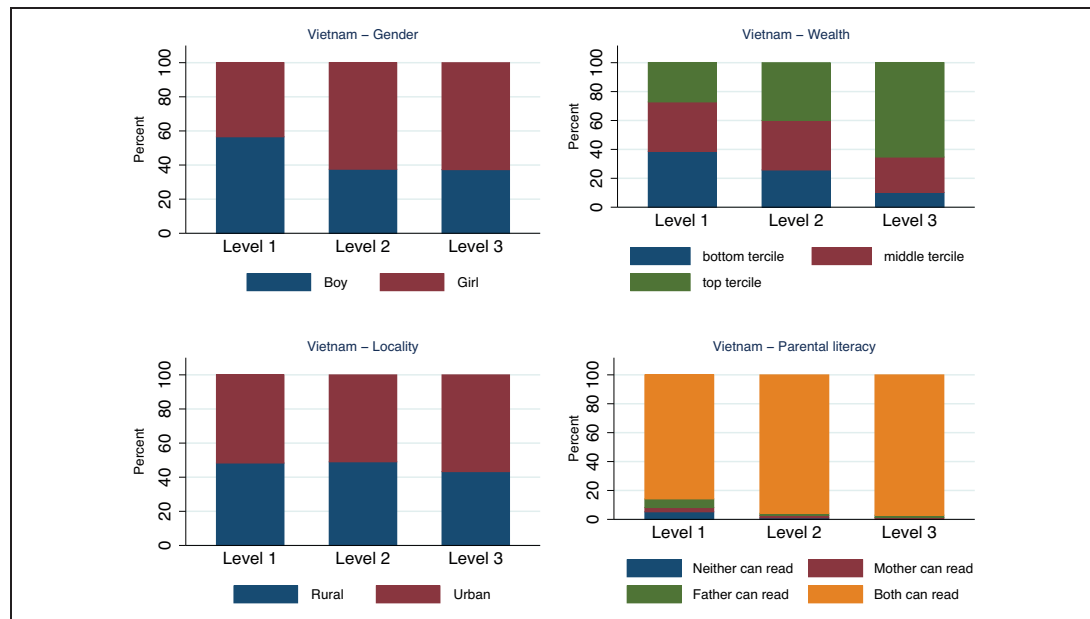
Figure 5. India – Differences in the background characteristics of students at each level of functional English proficiency



In India (Figure 5), wealth, locality and parental literacy matter for students' functional English skills. Although there is a small gender difference in the proficiency levels, there are quite stark differences in the other three background characteristics. Students in Level 3 are more likely to have literate parents, to be wealthier, and to attend schools in urban areas. Figure 6 shows a different picture between student characteristics and functional English skills in Vietnam. Vietnamese girls are more likely to have Level 3 (proficient) functional English skills, as are wealthier students. On the other hand, locality and parental literacy do not seem to matter for development of functional English skills. Most students in Vietnam have literate

parents, therefore parental literacy is not strongly associated with students' development of functional English skills.

Figure 6. Vietnam – Differences in the background characteristics of students at each level of functional English proficiency



5. Discussion

In this study, we analysed functional English skills among 15-year-old students in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam. The development of functional English skills among secondary school students is a function of the English language policy in each country, educational system, perception, use and background characteristics of student in those contexts. However, across all the three countries, English language is seen as a transferable skill for adolescents with potential relevance for continuing education and labour market opportunities.

In India, where there is a colonial history of the use of English language, it is unsurprising that students are more proficient on average in functional English language skills. Many Indians see English as a language of neutrality and one which can enable communication between states and regions. English is compulsory in school as a subject but also accessible to many students in private schools (and some government schools) as a medium of instruction. The challenge in India, however, is a disparity between access to English language in rural areas versus urban areas, where students from wealthier families in urban areas and those who have literate parents are likely to have greater access to English than their counterparts in rural areas and from less wealthier backgrounds. Our data offer some confirmation to the literature that English is at risk of becoming a subject which further exacerbates existing inequalities. The analysis showed stark differences between students' scores from poorer households and those from least poor households. We also know from our data that students attending private schools in India have higher proficiency in functional English skills. There needs to be policy intervention in the Indian context to ensure that these

inequalities identified at secondary school do not worsen and restrict disadvantaged students from accessing future educational opportunities and employment. However, this is likely to remain a challenge while English language proficiency remains tied to the type of school attended by students, something which has become a huge issue within the Indian education system as increasing numbers move into the private sector, leaving only those with little other choice attending government schools.

In Ethiopia, the situation is slightly different in that English language has relevance for a smaller proportion of the population working in the government sector, tourism and international organisations, but is compulsory for secondary and higher education. So, while a number of students need English as a language to progress through the educational system, they don't necessarily view it as useful beyond school. There are disparities between the way English is perceived in urban cities and in rural areas, and students are learning English differently across regions in Ethiopia. Our data showed that wealth, parental literacy and locality matter for students' development of functional English language skills, and this has the potential to increase inequalities to access to higher education and opportunities in certain sectors in Ethiopia. Such disparities may also become more important over time, as increasing use of technology and changing labour markets are likely to increase the transferability of English as a skill across Ethiopia. What is perhaps more of a concern for current students and their families is that levels of English language capability in Ethiopia appear very low. Our analysis suggests that many students in Ethiopia have achieved only basic English language skills by Grades 7-8. With English the medium of instruction for secondary education (Grades 9 onwards), this raises considerable doubts about the readiness of many children to study in English medium and therefore of their ability to progress from primary to secondary school.

In Vietnam, English seems to have gained the status of an aspirational language fairly recently and parents perceive English to be key to allowing their children access to greater opportunities in the future. However, within the school system, English is a compulsory subject but is taught at low standards in government schools (where the majority of students are enrolled). The challenge of teaching English in Vietnam could be a result of teacher's lack of confidence in the language and their own use and perceptions of the usefulness of English. Parents in Vietnam therefore provide private tuition for their children to learn English outside school. The challenge is that it is wealthier students who are able to access private English language tuition, while poorer students lag behind. In contrast to the other two countries, gender matters for the development of functional English skills and wealth in particular affects whether students are in the proficient band or not. Locality is not as important and high literacy levels in Vietnam mean most students have literate parents, so this does not discriminate much across functional English skills development. In Vietnam, long-term social divisions might become entrenched if only wealthier students have the opportunities to develop transferable skills that will become more relevant with globalisation and technological advancement. Government policy geared towards ensuring equality in skills development could go a long way to ensuring that home advantages do not worsen inequalities among learners in Vietnam. However, this may remain difficult while some sections of the population continue to view English as less relevant to their future plans, and while exposure to English outside lessons remains low for those in remote areas.

Overall, we can conclude from this analysis that inequalities exist within and between the three countries in students' development of functional English skills, but that difficult questions remain in understanding the extent to which this will impact upon adolescents in

these countries now and in the future. It is apparent that students' characteristics (parental education, wealth and locality) affect their functional English skills, with as much variation seen within countries as between them. This has clear implications for equality of future opportunities, given the increasing importance of English, and we suggest that, unless this is addressed, English skills may come to act as a 'divider' rather than an 'equaliser' now and in the future.

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'Functional English' Skills in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam: Comparing English Ability and Use Among 15 Year Olds in Three Countries

Increased globalisation, interconnectivity and overall exposure have promoted a considerable increase in developing countries in usage and aspiration to learn the English language. Among policymakers and individuals, English is considered important for economic advancement, employment and social mobility. In line with this, Young Lives included a 'functional English' assessment as part of its 2016-17 school survey with 15 year olds in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam, providing a unique opportunity to explore English language learning outcomes and some of the factors which affect these.

This working paper explores how functional English can be conceptualised, recognising the multiple ways in which young people in these diverse contexts may want to use English now and in the future. It also draws on analysis of data from the Young Lives school survey to consider the level of functional English competency which children in the three countries currently have, and how this relates to the types of English required by labour markets or higher levels of education. The paper examines the disparities in English levels within the three countries, including some of the background characteristics associated with higher levels of English, and discusses the implications of such gaps on the equality of education and employment opportunities in the future.



An International Study of Childhood Poverty

About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in four countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the four study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc, Ethiopia*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
- *Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
- *General Statistics Office, Vietnam*
- *Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, UK*

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