

Introduction

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was formed in 1967 with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand as its founding members. ASEAN now consists of ten countries with the addition of Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), and Cambodia (1999). With a population of around 600 million people, ASEAN is home to some 1,500 living languages (Lewis et al. 2014). Twelve official languages are recognized among the ten member countries, with English included as an official language in four countries (ASEAN 2015). While English has functioned as the common language of communication for ASEAN since its founding, it first became official with the signing of the ASEAN Charter in November 2007, when in Article 34 the members affirmed, “The working language of ASEAN shall be English” (ASEAN Charter 2008, 29).

As one of the initiatives to promote ASEAN integration through developing English language capacity throughout the region, a forum hosted by Universiti Brunei Darussalam and the East-West Center, Honolulu, was held in November 2013. The forum brought together English language policy and practice experts from all countries in the ASEAN region and papers from all ASEAN countries are presented in this publication. The chapters in this publication are divided into two parts. Part one consists of policies and practices relating to countries where English is a foreign language and part two focuses on areas formerly administered by Britain or the United States of America, where English is a second language.

The choice of foreign languages used in ASEAN countries has been much influenced by their colonial heritage and political alignment. The previously French Indochina countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam have had a history of adopting various European languages, depending on the prevailing political climate. Mab Tith and Mao Sareun provide an interesting overview of the various foreign languages used officially in Cambodia since 1953. With the withdrawal of France, French was replaced by Khmer, the language of 95 percent of its population, as the medium of instruction in schools. French remained the first foreign language till 1975, and was replaced by Vietnamese and Russian from 1979-1989, and again with French and English after the collapse of the Soviet Union. English began to be taught as a subject in schools from grade seven onwards from 1989. In 2014, English was introduced in schools as a subject from grade 4 onwards. Both authors feel that membership of ASEAN has been a major factor that has encouraged the study of English.

The demand for English is also fueled by economic factors. The presence of international aid agencies and international non-governmental organizations that work in English and provide a source of employment has led Cambodians to recognize the importance of developing English language skills. This is further

driven by a shift from a command to a market-oriented economy, which has increased the use of English in the business sector. The authors explain the challenges faced in the teaching of English, especially with the urban-rural divide. Various innovative projects have been implemented to overcome the divide, which include a “Teaching English by Radio” project, funded by a Japanese philanthropic organization.

In his paper, Somphone Kounnavongsa shows that Lao PDR has had a similar political heritage to Cambodia. Lao PDR has had a longer history in working with French compared to English. While French declined by the time of the Indochina war, it has been revived again and currently 35 percent of students receive their education in French. Somphone notes that while French has a healthier status in Laos compared to Cambodia and Vietnam, English has gained prominence as the language of the future. English is taught from grade 3 onwards and the teaching of English in Lao PDR appears to be well developed.

Vietnam has embarked on an ambitious plan to increase English proficiency among its people. Nguyen Ngoc Hung discusses the National Foreign Language 2020 Project. This project carries the high expectation that by 2020, most Vietnamese students graduating from secondary and tertiary education institutions will be able to use a foreign language in regular communication. His paper focuses on steps taken to develop teachers’ competency, which is a crucial factor for the success of the project.

Le Hoang Dung’s paper on Vietnam analyzes the current teaching and learning of English. English is taught from grade 6 onwards, with selected schools teaching from grade 3. English has also been made a compulsory course at the tertiary level. Based on research carried out, Le Hoang Dung has observed the difficulties teachers face in teaching communicative skills versus exam-oriented teaching. His paper presents survey results showing the challenges teachers face in developing the four language skills, and also other challenges such as low student motivation to learn, and working with less than satisfactory teaching materials. He puts forward useful suggestions to address the challenges faced, which among others include tapping into Vietnam’s universities as a valuable resource that could take a lead in developing teachers’ capacity.

Unchalee Sermsonswad and Chantra Tantipongsanuruk mention Thailand’s long tradition of teaching English, which dates back to the seventeenth century, with English first being added to the Thai education curriculum in 1891. Since 1996, English has been taught from grade 1 onwards. However despite the government’s efforts to strengthen English language education in the country through various projects, Unchalee and Chantra voice concern that Thailand’s proficiency in English remains very low with Thai students reporting the lowest TOEFL scores in ASEAN. The authors identify the problems of curriculum design, unqualified teachers, and lack of student motivation as problems that continue to contribute to Thailand’s low proficiency levels.

Fuad Abdul Hamied’s paper discusses Indonesia’s language policy in the region’s largest country, which has over 700 languages. Much effort has been taken to balance the use of the Indonesian language, which serves to unite the nation, while maintaining local languages. It is against this background that foreign languages, which are seen as a tool for international communication and accessing science and technology, are introduced. Fuad explains the dilemmas that occur in

the educational setting when striving to find a balance between national, local, and international languages. English is taught as an optional subject in primary schools and is compulsory in secondary schools. In selected schools in each province, English is used as a medium of instruction for particular non-English subjects. Fuad discusses the challenges faced in teaching English with emphasis on the competency of teachers.

Itje Chodidjah expands on English language teaching in Indonesian schools. She discusses the problems with the quantity and quality of teachers, with only 9 percent of teachers taking the TOEIC test demonstrating a basic working proficiency level and above. Nevertheless, with there being a shortage of teachers, the focus of the government is on producing more teachers. Itje also discusses the challenges with the implementation of the new 2013 curriculum, which was criticized in part because it removed English and science as subjects taught at the elementary school level. Introduced in a short span of time, the new curriculum created confusion due to the insufficient understanding of concepts and lack of training to implement the changes. The 2013 curriculum remains a source of controversy and is in the process of being rolled back and reviewed under the new Indonesian president and his new minister responsible for primary and secondary education. Itje puts forward suggestions on how ELT in Indonesia can be better managed.

The challenges faced by countries where English is a foreign language also cross over to countries where English is a second language. Ju Paw states that Myanmar has a long tradition in the teaching and learning of English. English was the language of law, administration, and modern education in Myanmar from 1885-1948. A shift from English as a medium of instruction in schools to Myanmar occurred in 1965 with the nationalization of the education system. English began to gain prominence again in 1981 with the introduction of the New Education Program, which sought to upgrade the standard of education in the country. In her paper, Ju Paw provides a comprehensive overview of the reforms that have taken place since 2012 in the education sector to increase English Language proficiency, with emphasis on the university level.

Khin Sein focuses on English Language teaching in Myanmar and provides a useful insight into the textbooks used in schools and universities. She evaluates the teaching practices and methods of examination at schools and finds that English language courses have not been very successful due to inappropriate teaching techniques, lack of teaching aids, and teachers lacking competency, a problem that appears to be common to the region. She discusses the planned reforms aimed at increasing the language proficiency and teaching methods of English Language instructors.

In her paper, Razianna Abdul Rahman describes Malaysia's present English language policy, which is, "To uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to strengthen the English Language." Under this policy, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has been adopted as a benchmark for measuring the proficiency levels of teachers, and as a nationwide up-skilling program implemented to assist teachers in meeting the minimum standards. Razianna further explains various other initiatives that have been implemented to raise the standard of English. This includes increasing the contact time allocated for teaching English, making English

a compulsory subject to pass in order to receive the national school-leaving certificate and establishing the Standards and Quality Council for English.

Brunei and Singapore have in common a bilingual education system, while the Philippines has recently introduced a multilingual education system. These countries have had varying degrees of success in terms of implementation.

English has been used in the Philippines since 1898 when it was administered by the United States of America. Isabel Pefianco Martin provides insights into English language policy in the Philippines from its Bilingual Education Policy of the 1970s to its current policy of multilingual education based on primacy of the mother tongue. The Bilingual Education Policy introduced in 1974 used English and Filipino as the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, this policy was felt to have a strong urban bias benefiting students living in Metro Manila, thus creating an educational gap. The shift towards a mother tongue based multilingual education in the Philippines began in 1998 where schools began to teach in local languages, and found an improvement in students' performance. The passing of the enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 promotes the use of mother tongue languages in schools. Isabel dismisses the perception that using mother tongue languages as the medium of instruction threatens English language learning, and instead sees this policy as supporting it.

Marilu Madrunio provides a good overview of the Philippines' curriculum in basic education, with the role English has played in the national curriculum from the colonial period until its present policy, which emphasizes mother tongue based multilingual education. She discusses research on teachers' and students' English Language Proficiency and steps taken to increase present standards. She advocates taking a historical approach to understanding the needs of current learners.

Haji Suhaila and Salbrina Sharbawi provide an overview of the state of English policy and practice in Brunei Darussalam. Brunei has had a long history with English education, dating back to the missionary schools in 1931. Brunei adopted a bilingual education policy in 1984, where English is taught as a subject and also used as a medium of instruction in schools. The paper describes a series of initiatives Brunei Darussalam has adopted to strengthen English Language skills among its students. These include setting up a partnership with the United Kingdom based Center for British Teachers to improve English language teaching and learning outcomes in Brunei through the placement of "native-speaker" teachers. The Brunei English Language Teachers Association was formed in 2003 and has also worked towards raising teaching standards. Among activities initiated are oratory and spelling bee competitions. Initiatives taken to strengthen English language teaching have led to Brunei being successful in implementing its bilingual education policy.

Saratha Sithamparam and Jainatul Halida focus on the teaching and learning of English in Brunei Darussalam. Here the new education system, implemented in 2009, adopted learner-centered English language education. Saratha and Jainatul discuss three interesting case studies in literacy learning at the preschool, primary school and lower secondary level, where the learner is placed at the heart of teaching and learning. Their case studies show the ability of students to draw on their experience and learn a language, making bilingualism a real possibility.

Among all countries in the region, English is given the most prominence in Singapore's education system. While English is used as a medium of instruction, students also learn their mother tongue. Christine Goh highlights the importance of English in Singapore. Though not a language native to most Singaporeans, English has been adopted as a home language. Even parents who are not fluent in the language will seek extra help for their children to learn English. It is recognized that English is needed for upward social mobility. This chapter highlights the everyday realities of teaching English in Singapore and examines how these realities interact with teachers' beliefs, which in turn influence the way the curriculum is implemented.

Wai Yin Pryke focuses on developments in Singapore's education system and English Language policies that were initiated from 1950s to the present. From its survival-driven phase from independence to the 1980s where English was made a compulsory subject of study, to the efficacy-driven phase of the 1980s-1990s, where English became the medium of instruction, English in Singapore is now in an ability-driven phase where the focus is on higher quality of teaching. Pryke provides a good overview of the establishment of the English Language Institute of Singapore and its current role of increasing the standards in teaching and learning English language in Singapore schools.

The chapters in this volume reveal many similarities in the challenges ASEAN countries face in improving the standard of English. The issues of teachers' competency in teaching English and lack of student motivation to learn English appear to be common in many countries in the region. The Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Lao PDR, with their high levels of linguistic diversity, also need to first find a balance between local languages and the national language, while also promoting the use of English for ASEAN integration.

As eloquently put by Isabel Pefianco Martin, "As the ASEAN region prepares for integration in 2015, it is important for stakeholders to keep in mind that integration does not mean giving up one's local identity and culture. Each member-state must continue to preserve, protect, and strengthen its local languages so that these co-exist with the national language, as well as with English, which is the lingua franca of the ASEAN."

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