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Learning English in ASEAN: Myths and Principles

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Abstract

Taking the ten countries which make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the context, in this paper I want to challenge some beliefs about language learning and propose some new principles. I shall argue that, in the richly multilingual contexts of ASEAN, the increasing tendency to introduce English earlier and earlier into the primary language curriculum not only threatens the long-term future of many local languages, but is also detrimental to the overall learning and cognitive development of many children, especially those who come from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. After showing that “traditional” English itself developed in contact with many languages, I shall also propose that a “multilingual model” of English should be taught. I shall further propose that the language learning focus of the ASEAN primary school should be on local languages, and that the teaching of English can be delayed.

How “Pure” Is English?

Far from being a “pure” language, English is, in fact a hybrid mongrel of a language. This is true of all varieties of English, but no more so than British English. British English has been influenced by contact with a wide range of other languages, including Classical Greek, Latin, Germanic languages, Old Norse and other Scandinavian languages, and Norman French. In more recent times, of course, it has also been influenced through contact with a host of other languages from all over the world, as a result of the period of British colonialism. For example, the “English” words *bungalow*, *chapati*, *cockatoo*, *kimono*, *judo*, *pyjamas*, and *typhoon* are all borrowed from different Asian languages.

Languages are dynamic; they change over time. During the long period between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, English lost many of its inflectional endings (Burchfield, 1985). Today, only the +s of the third person singular present tense marking remains in the standard form. However, in vernacular and non-standard forms – and these, of course, are the overwhelming majority of spoken varieties of English – earlier forms can be found. Thus in Yorkshire English, people still say “where’s thou bin?” (where hast thou been/where have you been?), using the old form of the second person inflection of *have* (cf. German *habst*). The fiendish “northern subject rule” still occurs in some vernaculars of British, Irish, and American English (McCafferty, 2003), where the following sentence follows the rule. “Cooks peels the potatoes and then they wash and boils them.” Note in this variety of English the plural nouns and pronouns take the +s marker on the present tense verb. The only exception is for the verb *adjacent* to a plural pronoun, which explains why *wash* does not take the +s, but *peels* does in the above example.

There have been parallel changes in pronunciation. The Great Vowel Shift, a gradual change which took place between 1400 and 1700, saw significant changes in the pronunciation of certain vowel sounds. For example, the English writer, Chaucer, would have pronounced “we do say it’s time to go now” as something like “way doe sah it’s teem to gaw noo” (Crystal, 2004, p. 252). Contemporary varieties of English are most easily distinguished by the accents of their speakers. The so-called “drawl” in the speech of people from the Southern United States turns *had* (a monophthong in standard British English) into a triphthong. In colloquial Australian English, the *main mine* diphthongs merge to *mine*. Thus the look of panic on the patient’s face when she thought she heard the doctor say “You can go home to die.” What the doctor actually said was “You can go home today.”

Most varieties dispense with the dental fricative TH sounds (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Hong Kong English is unique among Asian varieties in using a /f/ sound instead, so that the sign “RU34T” seen in a chain of tea houses in Hong Kong only makes sense when you realise that 3 is pronounced the same way as *free* in this variety of English. This so-called TH fronting is also seen in the native speaker variety of English known as “estuary English” spoken in and around London.

These examples of change and variation within and across varieties of English simply remind us that English is not a “pure” language, has always been and continues to be influenced by contact with other languages and is subject to constant change (Britain, 2010). This is important to understand, as the new Englishes that are developing, such as the many varieties of Asian English, are developing in exactly the same way as traditional Englishes have always done (Kirkpatrick, 2007).

“Myths” of Language Learning

This has significant implications for language learning. Carol Benson (2008, p. 2) has identified what she calls three myths of second language learning. They are:

1. to learn a second language, you must start as early as possible
2. the best way to learn a second language is to use it as a medium of instruction
3. the home language gets in the way of learning a second language

Acceptance of myth one has led to all regional governments, with the exception of Indonesia, introducing English as a compulsory subject in primary school, often from as early as primary one and usually from primary three. Apart from anything else, introducing English this early into the primary curriculum requires both material and human resources that very few governments have. China is obviously an extreme case, given the size of the population: it has been estimated that there are 350 million Chinese learners of English (Xu, 2010, p. 295), the majority of whom are school children. How many qualified and linguistically proficient English teachers would be needed to teach so many children? And in many countries, material resources are scarce, especially in rural areas. The following description of the lack of resources in the Philippines does not necessarily only apply there:

To this day, only 66.07% of elementary and secondary schools throughout the country have electricity. 13.3% have landline telephones. Only 2.9% have fax machines and 2% have internet access. In addition, 181,257 (out of roughly 450,000) public teachers reported that they had to bring their own tables to school; roughly the same number brought their own chairs. A smaller number (about 9,292) reported that they brought desks and chairs for their students. (Martin, 2005, p. 274)

In addition to the concern over the lack of material and human resources, there is the concern that the introduction of English into the primary curriculum is necessarily at the expense of other subjects. As it is most often local languages that are cut to make way for English, the teaching of English almost always means the non-teaching of local languages.

The first two of Benson's myths are often conflated so that English is used as a medium of instruction – and sometimes from as early as primary one – to teach other subjects, usually maths and science. To continue to draw on the Philippines as an example, the Bilingual Education Policy has been in force since 1974 (Benton, 1996; Gonzalez, 1996). Through this policy, children learn in two languages from primary one. They learn maths and science through English and other subjects through Filipino. Consider the linguistic demands that this puts on all but those middle class children who are fortunate enough to have been born in Manila. They are fortunate because Filipino, despite its name, is based on the language, Tagalog, which is spoken in and around Manila. They are fortunate because they have access to reasonable resources and their parents are probably English-speaking. Other children – and these are the great majority – are less fortunate. The Philippines is richly multilingual and these other children will grow up speaking other languages, their mother tongue and a regional lingua franca. This means that when they go to school, they will be required to learn and *learn other subjects in* two new languages. It is not surprising that the primary school drop out rate is alarmingly high. There are no pedagogic or cognitive reasons to support the teaching of maths and science in English at such an early age. To quote the Filipino scholar, Allan Bernardo:

...there seems to be no theoretical or empirical basis...to obligate the use of English in teaching mathematics, [and that] ...there are clear and consistent advantages to using the students' first language...at the stage of learning where the student is acquiring the basic understanding of the various mathematical concepts and procedures. (2000, p. 313)

It is reassuring, therefore, to note some recent changes in government policy with regard to the medium of instruction. The Philippines government, in an education order released in July 2009, has itself recently approved the use of vernaculars in the early years of primary school (<http://mothertongue-based.blogspot.com/>). The extent to which this will be successfully implemented, however, remains to be seen.

In another encouraging move, the Malaysian government has decided to abandon its project to teach English and science from primary one through English and re-introduce the use of *Bahasa Melayu* for these subjects in 2011-2012. In Singapore, as is well-known, English is *the* medium of instruction for *all* subjects. Now Singapore's particular concern is over the relative lack of proficiency in Chinese – especially literacy in Chinese – of many of Singapore's ethnic Chinese. This is hardly surprising, however, as a recent census indicated that 60% of primary one children report that English is their home language. In a rare acknowledgement, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew recently admitted that Singapore's bilingual policy had been a mistake and the way that Chinese language learning had been carried out was "madness" ("MM Lee Admits 'Mistake,'" 2009).

It is to be hoped, therefore, that the experience in the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore will lead other regional governments to think very carefully before introducing English as a medium of instruction in the primary school.

Acceptance of the third myth, namely that the home language gets in the way of learning a second language, leads to the deliberate neglect of children's mother tongues and vernaculars in the primary school. This can be wasteful, as a good command of the mother tongue not only

acts as a bridge to learning the second language, but also provides children with self-confidence in their own identity (Jhingran, 2009). This self-confidence can be crushed if the children are told or infer that their mother tongue is somehow inferior and is not to be spoken in school.

Three Principles

The result of the acceptance of these three myths is that in almost all Asian primary classrooms, the focus is on learning the national language and English. This prioritizing of national languages and English is seen all over the world and has led to predictions that, if it continues, more than half of the world's 6,500 languages will have disappeared by the end of this century (Hans Rausing, 2008). I therefore propose three alternative principles to supplant the three myths. These are:

1. Delay the introduction of English until child has literacy in the L1 and until conditions and facilities merit it.
2. Wherever possible and feasible, use the child's L1 as a medium of instruction.
3. Adopt multilingual benchmarks to measure linguistic proficiency and adopt the "multilingual model."

It is, of course, difficult to persuade parents that it is in their child's best interests to delay the learning of English until secondary school. It is also true that, all things being equal, learning a second language early is a good idea. However, when the circumstances are not suitable for the teaching and learning of English in the early years, introducing it too early can do far more harm than good. Many scholars are therefore now proposing a shift from the traditional cognitivist perspective of second language acquisition (SLA) to a more social perspective (e.g., Cook, 2008; Firth & Wagner, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2007). The cognitivist perspective of SLA sees the primary goal of language learning as the acquisition of native-like fluency. Learners are measured against native speaker benchmarks. But these benchmarks are not so relevant and appropriate in today's world where the major role of English is as a lingua franca. For example, in the ASEAN region alone, English is primarily used as a lingua franca by Asian multilinguals who have learned English as an additional language (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Thus, Indonesians and Filipinos will communicate with Cambodians through English. Multilinguals who use English as a lingua franca in this way do not need to sound like native speakers when they speak English. They do need to be internationally intelligible, however. Thus we argue that linguistic benchmarks should not be derived from native speakers, but rather should be derived from multilinguals who are able to communicate successfully in the regional and international arena. In the context of Cambodia, therefore, it would make sense to derive linguistic benchmarks for Khmer speaking children from Khmer speakers who operate successfully in English on the regional and international stage. As Garcia has argued, a multilingual education "doesn't accommodate to monolingual standards" and we therefore must "avoid the inequities in comparing bilingual children to a monolingual child in one of the languages" (2009, p. 386). The successful multilingual becomes the *linguistic* as well as the role model. In this more social perspective of SLA, therefore, the achievement of the learner is measured against the ability to use the language successfully rather than the ability to sound like a native speaker. As illustrated at the beginning of the paper, varieties of English are, by definition, characterized by variation. Multilinguals for whom English is an additional language do not have to sound and speak like native speakers, nor need they. They need to be intelligible in regional and international contexts.

The adoption of this multilingual model has a number of far-reaching implications for English language teaching in the region in terms of the language teacher, the pedagogy and the curriculum (Kirkpatrick, 2010; 2008). With regard to the language teacher, the local multilingual English teacher (MET) is a more appropriate and relevant model for the learners

than a native English teacher (NET). It goes without saying, of course, that the MET must be trained as a language teacher and have a high level of English proficiency. This, in turn, means that the authority of the NET is diminished. If governments were to take this model on board, they would be able to re-prioritize their resources and spend far more on training local METs and far less on importing NETs.

ELT pedagogy would also see changes. Instead of insisting on English as the sole language of the English classroom, METs can adopt a multilingual pedagogy and use their students' language(s) in systematic ways to help in the learning of English (Littlewood & Yu, 2009). One example is Cummins' (2005) suggestion of dual language books, whereby students are encouraged to write in their L1 first and then translate their L1 writing into English. One great advantage of this is that it allows the students to express themselves say what they really feel. This contrasts with the all too familiar experience of second language students only saying what they *can* say in the target language. Another example of the use of a multilingual pedagogy is the use of "linguaging," whereby students can use their first language while working on a task, but must report it or write it up in English.

The adoption of the multilingual model also sees a radical new English language curriculum. Far from teaching subjects like maths and science through English, the English class provides and opportunity for an in-depth study of regional cultures, the cultures of the people to whom the learners are most likely to be communicating with in English as a lingua franca. The study of local and regional cultures is of particular importance, as the study of regional and local languages is currently so restricted. The only way many students will have access to local and regional cultures is through English. Such a cross-cultural curriculum should also include an introduction of regional and world Englishes to encompass the study of contrastive pragmatic and rhetoric. A third component of the ELT curriculum would be a study of literatures in English, as illustrated by this example from a Filipino secondary school (Thompson, 2003), where each year of the secondary literature curriculum is divided as follows:

S1: "I am a Filipino."	(Students read Filipino literature in English)
S2: "I am an Asian."	(Students read Asian literature in English)
S3: "I am an English speaker."	(Students read English and Filipino literature in English)
S4: "I am a citizen of the world."	(Students read world and Filipino literature in English)

Conclusion

To conclude, the theme of the conference was "One World-World Englishes." In this post colonial and post-Anglophone world, descriptions which both fit Cambodia perfectly today (Clayton, 2006), the time has come to recognize that the major regional role of English is as a lingua franca spoken by multilinguals throughout ASEAN and Asia. It is also time, therefore, to recognize that the multilingual varieties of English spoken through the region are legitimate and appropriate models of the English language classroom.

The UNESCO report "Education for All by 2015" identifies school drop out rates by primary five as the main challenge facing many regional education systems (cf. Heder, 2007 for information on Cambodia). To improve primary school retention rates, children first need to develop fluency in their mother tongue and the national language. This should be the focus of language education in primary schools, not English. To rephrase the three principles introduced above in a slightly different way, (cf. also Kirkpatrick 2009) I propose that:

1. wherever possible, the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction; otherwise a local language should be used;
2. English can happily be delayed until at least the later years of primary school; and

3. the goal of learners of English in multilingual and lingua franca settings should be multilingual performance and proficiency - the multilingual model - not an idealized native-like proficiency.

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