Editor's Note

Supporting the Success of English Language Learners in the Asian Region

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Internationalization, globalization, and regionalization are increasingly promoting the importance and popularity of English language teaching and learning in Asia. While controversies and debates remain concerning level appropriacy, access, local contextual influences, teacher qualifications, status compared to local languages, and identity (Bray, 2000; Hallak, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Phillipson, 1992, 2001; Rahman, 2009), the influence of English is growing, and is predicted to continue to grow in the coming decades (Graddol, 1997, 2006; Nunan, 2003; Phillipson, 2001; Stroupe, 2010). Politically, a number of countries and regional blocs have made moves that have influenced the importance of English in the region, most notably the adoption by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) of English as the working language of the organization (Kirkpatrick, 2011) and the entry of China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Nunan, 2003). In addition, in 2004 and 2005, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organization made a move to focus on developing the English (and Mandarin) language skills in the region through the *Strategic Plan for English and Other Languages* to further advance economic development (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2005).

In response to these trends, countries in the Asian region have implemented educational policies that are refocusing efforts on English language instruction, often beginning instruction at increasingly lower grades, increasing the total number of years of English requirements within a curriculum, and / or increasing the number of hours required within a particular grade level (Gorsuch, 2000; Graddol, 1997, 2006; Hashimoto, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2010; 2011; Nishino, 2008; Nunan, 2003). As a result, local teachers, often with limited resources and / or insufficient institutional or professional support (Hull, 2011; Nguyen & To, 2011; Nishino, 2008; Nunan, 2003; Stewart, 2009) are faced with new challenges in providing English language learning experiences which offer students the support, opportunities for success, and resulting proficiency levels necessary for professional or academic achievement beyond their school experience.

In many cases, global trends and government initiatives have resulted in increased emphasis on accountability as well. In the United States, new accountability procedures are being imposed through educational policies such as *No Child Left Behind* and the implementation of the *Common Core Standards* (Echevarria, 2006; National Council of Teachers of English, 2008;

Saunders, 2009). Australian institutions ensure the quality of domestic and offshore ELT programs through the implementation of the *Standards and Criteria for ELT Centres in Australia* (National ELT Accreditation Scheme [NEAS], 2008). In other cases, already existing international models such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2011) are being adopted or adapted in other countries to ensure the quality of education in general and language education in particular (Council of Europe, 2001; Graddol, 2006; Kuhlman, Tafani, Delija, & Diaz-Maggioli, 2010).

Countries around the Pacific Rim are also meeting the challenges presented by increasingly diverse student populations. In the United States, the expanding immigrant student population is placing new demands on teachers and the educational system as a whole, while at the same time, specific challenges faced by the increasing number of international students attending domestic universities have been considered (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). Likewise, Australian universities are also striving to meet the unique needs of their growing international student population (Dooley, 2004; Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001).

As countries in the Asian region expand their English language education programs (Nunan, 2003), educators and researchers in the Asian region and beyond are investigating and experimenting with creative methodologies, approaches, and materials in order to better support the English language learning of their students (Stroupe, 2010; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008). Emphasis has been placed on utilizing students' cultural backgrounds and L1 effectively in conjunction with English (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004) and increasing students' motivation (Hamada, 2011). Consideration has also been placed on better understanding students' communication styles as they relate to English language learning (Takanashi, 2004).

Developing culturally sensitive and useful materials, both authentic and professionally published, has also been a point of investigation (Chea & Klein, 2011; Hamada, 2011; McPherson, 2005; Vijayaratham, 2008). Nevertheless, in many contexts in Asia, particularly in Japan (Gorsuch, 2000; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004), China (Deng & Carless, 2010), and South Korea (Hwang, 2003), primarily form-focused, high-stakes university entrance exams continue to significantly impact the methodology, content, and focus of secondary English language instruction.

As instruction employing a communicative approach becomes more widespread (Nunan, 2003), based on changing national policies in the region (Butler & Iino, 2005; Graddol, 1997, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2011; Nishino, 2008), teachers in Asia continue to aim to provide their students opportunities to successfully use English in the classroom. In Hong Kong, Wong (2009) has investigated effective methods of developing skills necessary in seminar classes, while Kobayashi (2001) has reported on Japanese students' positive view of communicating in English as an international language. Also in Japan, Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) have examined how an "imagined international community" (p. 569) can be effectively used to prepare students to study abroad. In Taiwan, Lu and Kuo (2011) have considered how teachers' perceptions affect connected speech instruction.

Likewise, other skill areas have received attention. Vocabulary development has been emphasized as a method to support and improve the reading skills of learners in Thailand (Suppasetserree & Saitakham, 2008), while Nation (2011) suggests successful vocabulary teaching activities that can be applied across the region. Developing specific reading strategies is the focus of Subbiah and Ismail's (2009) investigation in Malaysia, and teaching literature in

Cambodia has been considered by Narith and Mab (2006). Additionally in Cambodia, effective feedback on writing has been investigated (Sou, 2010), while Matsuda (2011) has considered how globalization is influencing the teaching of writing.

Coupled with communicative opportunities and language skill development, teachers in the region are increasingly focusing on study skills and strategies, oftentimes adapting them to the local context. Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford (2003) have provided an overview of learning styles and learning strategies, while Oanh (2006) has considered contextualized student autonomy and independent learning in Vietnam, and Yang (1998) has examined issues related to learner autonomy in Taiwan. Atkinson (1997) has explored the cultural appropriacy of teaching critical thinking skills in the Japanese context; Stroupe (2006) has argued that critical thinking skills should be scaffolded and taught as other skills are throughout language instruction. Such research indicates that many teachers in the region see that supporting students includes skills beyond grammatical or linguistic understanding and communicative competence.

Teachers themselves continue to be the focus of much academic investigation in the region, with particular emphasis on native language and educational background. Increasingly, English language instruction is more often successfully provided by non-native English (NNS) speaking teachers to NNS students who will be communicating with NNS counterparts in the region (Graddol, 1997, 2006; Liu, 2011). Teacher education programs continue to consider the skills teachers will need to prepare the next generation of graduates, including pedagogical content knowledge (Gopinathan, 1999), and more recently, technology (Hallak, 2000). Yet concerns remain regarding whether teachers in the region are supported sufficiently to be fully prepared for the demands of the future (Nishino, 2008; Vilches, 2005).

The connection between school and “the world of work” continues to be important as teachers in Asia prepare their students with the skills necessary to be successful in an increasingly global business sector. Testing preparation remains important through the tertiary level, as companies continue to recruit freshman employees who have achieved high test scores, most notably in TOEFL, TOEIC (Butler & Iino, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Stewart, 2009; Yoshida, 2003), and IELTS, for academic and professional purposes (Merrifield, 2011; O’Loughlin, 2008; Read & Wette, 2009). Yet, increasingly, due to pressures from the business community, solely relying on test scores is often insufficient: employers are now seeking graduates who can demonstrate international communicative competence and are focusing on intelligibility rather than British or American standards, as much communication in English in the Asian region is between non-native speakers rather than between non-native and native speakers of English (Graddol, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Matsuda, 2011; Stroupe, 2010). Proficiency in English continues to lead to economic opportunities, exemplified by call centers in the Philippines (Friginal, 2007), India (Graddol, 2006; Warschauer, 2000), and Pakistan (Rahman, 2009).

In the current issue of *Language Education in Asia*, authors continue to contribute to the discussion of these topics related to successfully supporting Asian English language learners. Researchers have investigated ways in which to improve the language teaching and learning provided to learners in the region. Mirador considers writing in her research article. When examining students’ understanding of the purposes of academic writing in western cultures, she also identifies the most common writing errors in this genre with her Chinese students in extension campuses of Western institutions in China. Her results indicate that students most often emphasized skills-based issues related to improvement and overall essay organization rather than higher order aspects of their reasoning through the writing process.

The additional research papers in the current volume focus on strategy use. Selamat and Sidhu consider metacognitive strategy use in lecture style courses in a technical university in Malaysia. Their research indicates that employing explicit metacognitive strategy instruction can result in more effective listening skills for students. Additionally, reading strategies provide the focus for Lien's research in Taiwan. In her study, students' level of reading anxiety was shown to be negatively correlated with their employment of reading strategies. Based on her findings, recommendations for lessening anxiety and improving reading strategies are suggested.

Developing linguistic and learning skills are emphasized in papers related to more practical issues in the classroom. Doan considers the importance of practice when improving students' speaking skills in Vietnam. She emphasizes the role of the teacher is providing specialized activities and guidance to students to result in more effective practice. A more specific class activity, the presentation, is the focus of Shimo's paper. In the context of Japan, she explains a step-by-step procedure that, through providing time for reflection and understanding, allows students to deliver more effective presentations. Also in Japan, Aubrey addresses a common problem teachers face in the communicative classroom: hesitancy on the part of students to communicate. He addresses the willingness to communicate by focusing on specific variables, i.e., group dynamics, relevant topics, and level of anxiety, which can be manipulated to successfully create a classroom atmosphere in which students will be more forthcoming during their communicative activities.

Also related to classroom instruction are two papers on the context of the classroom, one emphasizing the use of input from outside the classroom, and the other focusing on improving listening skills in activities in the classroom. Guo helps students realize that there is extensive English use in their environment outside of the classroom, even in a non-English dominant country such as Taiwan. As they analyzed the accuracy of English examples they found, the students gained a heightened awareness of the proliferation of English in their daily lives. Morley also discusses how he utilized video clips and images in order to provide a more contextualized basis when working with listening activities. When evaluated, learners indicated that they not only preferred activities that were context-rich, but also performed better on associated listening assessments.

It is with great appreciation that I thank all those who have contributed to the current issue of *Language Education in Asia*, including all the teachers and researchers represented in this publication, and all those in the region who continually reflect on their experiences and are determined to improve not only their effectiveness in the classroom, but their students' understanding and achievement as well. Special appreciation is reserved for the publication's Advisory and Editorial Board members, Assistant Editors, Mr. Chea Kagnarith and Ms. Deborah Harrop, and most importantly, the Assistant Editor-in-Chief, Ms. Kelly Kimura, without whose support and dedication this publication would not be possible.

It is hoped that the addition of the articles in the current issue of *Language Education in Asia* to the scholarly work dedicated to improving the understanding and delivery of English language instruction in the Asian region will provide further insight into the unique context in which we teach. Through sharing our experiences and insights, we are able to support each other as educators and researchers; in addition, we enhance our own professional development and the skills and expertise we utilize in our classrooms, which have a direct impact on the success of our students.

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