Introduction: English in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT: This special issue focuses on the challenges faced by different countries in Southeast Asia with regard to the English language and suggests possible future directions which can be taken from multiple perspectives: from broad theoretical perspectives, paradigms, research areas, language planning and policy issues to language teaching and language education.

Research on English in Southeast Asia has received significant attention over the past few decades. This is unsurprising in a region characterized by linguistic diversity, and where English plays a dynamic role in both intra- and international communication and therefore provides a rich field for linguistic research. The use of English no longer serves as just a means of communication with those from outside Southeast Asia but, increasingly, English is a lingua franca unifying the different ethnic groups that live within the region. English in Southeast Asia falls into two broad categories: the first category includes the varieties of English used in the Outer Circle countries as described by Kachru (1992), that is, the varieties in the countries that were formerly colonies or protectorates of an English-speaking power, for example Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore; the second category includes the varieties of English in the Expanding Circle countries where English is used as a foreign language in countries, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The fact that within one geographical region there exists varieties of English that fall within different circles within the Kachruvian paradigm already warrants much research interest. One could conduct studies on understanding the historical origins of English within each of these countries and how their roles and functions have developed over time. Features-based studies, variation studies, language policy and planning and its impact on language teaching and learning are all areas worthy of research within and across the different countries in the region.

As English is becoming the primary language in social transformation processes in Southeast Asia, national education systems face a significant demand for appropriate levels of competence in English. With the goal of an ASEAN economic community by 2015, there is considerable pressure to close the English proficiency gap that currently exists among different ASEAN member states. Countries with low levels of proficiency in English and lack of access to information and technology realize that their economic growth and competitiveness will be severely hampered if they do not heavily invest in this area.

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Countries that have retained a strong position of English as an official or a strong second language such as Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines and Brunei have a stronger base than those where English has only recently become the first foreign language as in Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. In the first group of countries, English is either the sole medium of instruction (MoI) such as in Singapore or one of a few main media of instruction. English also has a strong position in the public domain. In the social domain, a range of localized forms may be in use that may require consideration. In the second group of countries, English is used in relatively limited domains such as in foreign trade and tourism although globalization and economic growth have greatly encouraged and necessitated the increased use of English. Signs of nativization of the English language and first language interferences are clearly visible.

Knowledge of English is a key element of a country’s competitiveness which allows its citizens to communicate with other countries, gain access to freely available information on the internet and to integrate into global markets more easily. Education systems in several countries have, until the recent past, tended to focus on creating or preserving a national identity and were trying to juggle local needs, national priorities, and the availability of resources against global demands. In the last few years, the national educational policies in many countries have attempted to respond to global demands. Thus, countries like Cambodia and Vietnam, which do not yet have a competitive base in English, need to improve their competence in English in particular in their communication skills in order to meet the needs of multinational companies. All countries realize that they have to empower students through English to help them gain access to higher education and entry to an increasingly globalized job market. Language policies need to identify the specific purposes of education, English language teaching and the contributing role of other regional languages. Needless to say, in tandem with the vast differences in the roles of English in the different countries within the region, research on English across the different countries has also received varying attention with those within the Outer Circle receiving much more research than those in the expanding circle varieties. This special issue is interested in understanding the challenges faced in the different countries with regard to the English language and what possible future directions might be taken from multiple perspectives, from broad theoretical perspectives, paradigms, research areas, language planning and policy issues to language teaching and language education.

The volume is kick-started with a paper by Andy Kirkpatrick who examines the role of English as the main lingua franca in Southeast Asia and makes predictions about the future development of English in the region. The paper argues that a multi-causal approach to understand the ecology of localized varieties is useful and that these varieties include local cultural content. Turning to the role of English in the transformation processes of Southeast Asian nations, the paper concludes that the future of English is quite unpredictable and open-ended, one conclusion that alone calls for more ongoing research on English in the region.

This paper is followed by Ee-Ling Low’s meta-analysis of the vast amount of research done on English in Singapore in order to generate future research directions. The paper traces the history and the theoretical perspectives/ paradigms that have guided research over the past three decades and discusses the main trends emerging from this research. On the basis of a statistical breakdown of some 350 publications and a diachronic mapping of the main research trends, further research areas warranting attention are identified. The
paper concludes with a consideration of what existing research implies about the theoretical modelling of English in Singapore.

The following paper by Azirah Hashim focuses on the development of Malaysia’s language ecology within the context of nation-building, how English in Malaysia is embedded in the Southeast Asian region, and the global challenges met by the situation confronting the future of English in Malaysia. Narrating the history of language policies for education and the public domain, the paper identifies several areas of concern and concludes with concrete proposals for policy shifts that should be accompanied by research. Isabel Martín provides a description and critique of English language teaching approaches in the Philippines. In spite of the benefits offered by the Philippine variety of English, the paper highlights the issues pertaining to the acceptability of this variety and proposes a framework that recognizes both the identity and communicative functions of the language. English in Brunei is discussed by Noor Azam Haji-Othman and James McLellan who summarize the debates about the existence of Brunei English as an in-group identity marker and the challenges in medium in education. These issues are framed in the context of the tension between Malay as the national and official language and the need for English in international and global communication.

Moving to a lesser-known area is a paper on English in Cambodia by Azirah Hashim, Yee Chee Leong and Pheak Tra Pich. The authors carried out a study of undergraduates and the courses offered at universities to determine if they effectively prepare students for employability and the global market. A multi-method approach, using observations, questionnaires, and interviews, reveals major obstacles to research and efficient classroom techniques. Improvement requires a cultural change towards education as well as stimulants to increase both the research intensity and output. The volume ends with a paper by Gerhard Leitner who addresses the transformation of language habitats as a result of implantation and contact. Starting with a history of English and taking a comparative approach to syntax, speech acts and politeness, he argues for a regional layer of English beyond national boundaries and a strong input from local language families. He concludes that with localization going beyond nations, this should have more impact on educational policies.

It is hoped that the papers in this special issue combined offer fresh and insightful perspectives on English in the region. For the countries where vast amounts of research exist, gaps are found and future research directions are proposed. Interestingly, for the countries receiving much more scant attention in the past, including them in this volume signals a new and promising start to encouraging the burgeoning of future research.

REFERENCE


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