Invited panel: English in multilingual Asia: challenges and opportunities for multilingual education

In many Asian countries parents are demanding an increased use of English in education, both as a subject but also as a language of instruction. The demand for proficiency in an international language such as English is natural, but it is clear that many education systems which try to develop such proficiency are unable to reach the goals they set. So, what are good Asian practices that ensure real English proficiency for a large proportion of the populations? How can the mother tongue, national languages, and English coexist in a way that truly meet a child’s longterm educational needs?

Using English in school systems of countries in which English is not widely spoken causes challenges to the education systems as a whole as well as to individual teachers. Teachers are not well-trained, materials are not available or are of low quality, and a focus on English can increase disparities between the advantaged and the less advantaged. An overemphasis on English can sometimes be detrimental to the ability of learners in their mother tongue/s or in the national/official languages of the country.

There is increasing pressure to start earlier and teach more English. As a result, some Asian education systems are introducing English as a subject of study or a language of instruction in the early years of primary education or, in some cases, even in early childhood education. This is often done without pilot studies or ongoing evaluation; policymakers and parents assume that more English, started earlier, will have good results.

This panel discusses the role of English in education in Asian contexts in which English is not the first language of learners. The panel has five participants representing the research community as well as Asian practitioners. The panel will address the following issues:

- What does research say about the early introduction of English in schools of non-English speaking countries?
- What practical examples in multilingual Asia support the use of English as a language of instruction?; What examples cast doubt on this approach?
- What is the appropriate balance of the first language, the national/official language/s, and English in education systems which promote multilingual education?
- In which contexts should English be studied as a subject or instead be used as a language of instruction?
- What is the appropriate age to introduce English as a subject or use it as a language of instruction when English is not the first language of learners?
- What is the proficiency of teachers in English and what is their capacity to teach English/teach in English?
- What challenges do Asian teachers face in order to provide good quality English education?
- Despite parental demand, why might delaying the introduction of English in schools of non-English speaking countries be a good idea?

Panelists:
- Khaing Phyu Htut, a panelist
- Andy Kirkpatrick, a panelist
- John Knagg, a panelist
- Naashia Mohamed, a panelist
- Junnie Armel T. Salud, a panelist
- Cliff Meyers, moderator