The role of English in ASEAN: implications for language policy and pedagogy

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Outline

• Implications of English being the working language of ASEAN
• Use of ELF among Asian multilinguals
• Principles of a suggested ELF approach to language teaching
• Myanmar as an example
Implications of Article 34 of the 2009 ASEAN Charter ‘The working language of ASEAN shall be English’

Many Asian multilinguals for whom English is an additional language use English as a lingua franca with each other

[Consider also motivation to modernize, internationalize – e.g. increasing EMI in HE across Asian universities including Myanmar]
The ASEAN Charter also lists, as one of the 14 principles listed in Article 2, the need to have ‘respect for the different cultures, languages and religions of the people’s of ASEAN....in the spirit of unity in diversity’

ASEAN identity as part of the three ASEAN pillars (political security, economic, sociocultural)
ASEAN Secretary General Le Luong Minh (2013)

‘with the diversity in ASEAN reflected in our diverse races, histories, cultures and belief systems, English is an important and indispensable tool to bring our community closer together’
The question is:

How can the promotion of English as the sole working language be married to the need to respect ASEAN languages, cultures and religions?

This is the question I shall attempt to address here.
We need to consider the roles of English as a Lingua Franca, its linguistic development, and its likely impact on the health of local languages, especially when partnered with major national/regional languages such as Indonesian, Filipino, Thai, Vietnamese etc; and, of course, Putonghua.
My, perhaps pessimistic, prediction is that the number of people in Asia who are multilingual in Asian languages will reduce. Instead we will see an increasing number of people who are bilingual in (i) their respective national language and (ii) English.

So the prediction is that ASEAN will see a growth of people with the bilingual template of:

National language + English
The future of many of the 1000+ languages of ASEAN looks bleak

The 700 or so languages of Indonesia

The 180 or so languages of the Philippines

How can these be maintained?
Do people want them to be maintained?
‘We need to know English so that we can defend our interests...ASEAN Is not some kissy-kissy brotherhood. The countries are fiercely competitive, and a strong knowledge of English will help us protect Cambodian interests.’

‘When we use English we don’t think about the United States or England. We think only about the need to communicate.’ (Clayton 2006: 230-233)
Not surprisingly, 9 out of 10 of the countries of ASEAN make English a compulsory subject from primary school (Indonesia the sole exception); and some make it a medium of instruction for other subjects; in Singapore it is the medium of instruction.

It is the first ‘foreign’ language taught.
ASEAN + 3 and BRICS make up well over half the world’s population.

The major role of English in the region (world) is as a lingua franca. Note that there are a billion Asian multilingual users of English in Asia alone (compared with some 350 million native speakers)

    ELF should be taught in schools

With this in mind, here are 6 proposals for teaching English as a lingua franca – the lingua franca approach.
Principle#1
The native speaker of English is not the linguistic target. The goal is mutual intelligibility.

The primary role of English is as a lingua franca between multilinguals for whom English is an additional language.

Which accent? Whose identity? Whose grammar?
‘Every corner of the country displays a wide range of grammatically non-standard forms, reminding us that such forms are the rule rather than the exception in spoken English’ (Britain 2010:53).

‘We eats there most Saturdays’; ‘she love going up the city’ (2010:40).

‘They peel and boils them’; ‘Birds sings’
The Asian Corpus of English (ACE) data suggests that the use of non-standard forms in spoken Asian ELF is less frequent than in vernacular varieties of British English.

The crucial influence of context and the level of formality.

Even so:
First language speakers of Malay in subset of ACE (Kirkpatrick and Subhan 2014)

Use of marked vs unmarked present tense/simple past tense forms

306 marked versus 107 unmarked

Informal settings: 153 m v 100u/m

Formal settings: 152 v 7u/m
Adopting a mutual intelligibility/multilingual goal rather than a native speaker goal has important implications

1 The primary school can focus on the first language/mother tongue(s) of the children and the national language to give them a sense of cultural identity and self confidence

2 English can be delayed until children have fluency and literacy in the local /national language(s)
More and more people think a foreign language must be learned early, **But**

(i) Schools are not natural language learning environments

(ii) Early language ‘learning’ can prove a very bitter experience for children

(iii) Languages can be easily forgotten

(iv) Existence of a critical period seems improbable
Factors other than age are crucially important. Family background; socio-economic status; educational levels; quality of teachers and materials; the individual learner; motivation, etc. etc.

So there is no need to ask children to start to learn English too early.

(see Lambelet and Berthelele 2015, Benson 2008)
3 Local cultures and languages can become part of the school curriculum.

As an example, note the recent policy shifts in the Philippines away from the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) to the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education policy (MTB-MLE) where children have the right to learn in one of 19 nominated local languages for at least the first 3 years of primary school.
Principle#2
The native speaker’s culture is not the cultural target. The goal is (Asian-focused) intercultural competence.

The ELT curriculum needs to inform learners about the cultures of Asia (and elsewhere).

Buddhism – Islam – Hinduism – Christianity

Local literatures in English
Hybrid languages, popular culture and code-mixing

A second study using ACE (Kirkpatrick, Patkin, Wu 2012) has shown that topics discussed by Asian multilinguals when using ELF include:

Islamic finance; Thai-Myanmar border issues; what is my first language?; chillies and jealousy; coffee as the soul of Vietnam; Thai rice or Malaysian rice?; winning arguments at ASEAN meetings.
In Indonesia, for example, English is used to promote Islam

English and Islamic Values in *pesantren* (Fahrudin 2013)

‘it is also necessary for us to master English for proselytising’, ‘English can deliver information about my religion’ (Dewi 2012:22)
Principle #3

Well-trained local multilinguals provide the most appropriate EL teachers.

EL teachers with knowledge of their students’ language(s) and who are familiar with the cultures of the region make ideal teachers for the lingua franca approach for at least 6 reasons.
(i) they have empathy for their students;
(ii) they are good role models;
(iii) they are good linguistic models;
(iv) they can instill/facilitate intercultural competence in their students;
(v) they can exploit bilingual pedagogy;
(vi) they can establish and promote a multilingual ethos.
Who is going to teach Thai students about the role /principles of Islam in Indonesia, of Catholicism in the Philippines? (Remembering Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter)

Who is going to teach Indonesian students about the role /principles of Buddhism in Thailand or Myanmar?

In which language would this knowledge be taught?
Principle#4

Lingua franca environments provide excellent learning environments for lingua franca speakers

Lingua franca environments provide natural English speaking contexts, without the presence of native speaker ‘experts’.

Lingua franca speakers are proficient at cross-cultural communication.
Local lingua franca environments provide opportunities for learning regional cultures

Where might there be appropriate and natural English as a lingua franca environments in ASEAN?

Brunei
The Philippines
Malaysia
Singapore
And....
Principle #5
Spoken is not the same as written
There are no LI writers

We all have to learn, consciously, how to write

Differences associated with different genres
[cf ‘tweets’ with engineering reports; poems with documents; love letters with judicial arguments; philosophy with accountancy]
Different cultures play by different rhetorical rules.

Disciplinary differences.

Standard written norms are often determined by culture, discipline, genre. These need to be learned.
Principle #6
Assessment must be relevant to the lingua franca/ASEAN context

Measures of functional proficiency (how successfully can a person use the language in relevant contexts) need to be developed

Benchmarks must be relevant and appropriate, so that:
‘The candidate’s accent bears no trace of his or her first language’ is precisely the type of benchmark that needs to be discarded.

European Common Framework of Reference may offer some guide (e.g., Vietnam), but:

Local benchmarks and measures must be developed. ASEAN/SEAMEO need to take the lead here.
What is the current language education policy in Myanmar?

Current policy is for EMI in all universities and HEIs.

EMI for maths and science in final two years of high school.

English introduced as a subject from primary one.
Using English as a Medium of Instruction (MoI): this is fundamentally not working for teaching Maths and Science as few teachers can use English, let alone, teach another subject in English. Students are not learning or understanding important concepts in Maths and Science. They merely remember the technical terms in English for the tests. Most teachers use a mix of Myanmar (for explanation) and English (for technical terms) (Drinan 2013: 8).
EMI - a contrived endeavour, without reasonable amount of prior training or English language input

There is an insurmountable barrier for most teachers and learners to participate even in very basic communication in English

Many teacher educators scored AO level (CEFR) (Htut 2016)
Over 95% of surveyed staff and students reported that EMI had to be used bilingually along with Burmese (Myanmar language) for it to have any chance of success.
Suggested Language Education Policy

Basic Education

1. Where the children are L1 speakers of the Myanmar language, the early years of primary school should focus on the teaching of the language and the use of the Myanmar language as the language of instruction across the curriculum.
2. Where the children are L1 speakers of the Myanmar language, a course in the diversity of cultures, religions and languages of Myanmar should be offered.

3. Where the majority of children are L1 speakers of an ethnic language other than the Myanmar language, the first 4 years of primary school should be taught in the children’s home language, provided certain criteria are met.
4. Where the majority of children are L1 speakers of an ethnic language other than the Myanmar language, this language should be taught as a subject after the fourth grade, when ML becomes the language of instruction.

5. English should be introduced only when children are 11 years old, after 5 or 6 years of learning ML and/or the respective mother tongue.

6. The target for English learners should be to become functional multilinguals, able to use English successfully in international contexts (as outlined in the six principles above).
1. The Myanmar language and English need to be seen as complementary languages of education and scholarship.

2. EMI must only be introduced within a framework of multilingualism (e.g., Schaller-Schwaner 2015) so that:
   1. EMI does not mean English only.
1. The use of the linguistic resources of staff and students should be encouraged.

1. Materials and sources and reading lists / classroom language / working on assessments (processes vs products).

1. The ‘E’ of EMI needs to be understood as English as a lingua franca not a native speaker variety.
The Asian Corpus of English (ACE) is accessible at:

http://corpus.ied.edu.hk/ace/

Thank you.
References