

English in ASEAN: Key Effects

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Abstract - In 2007, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) rather unsystematically declared English to be its sole official language. While several scholars have looked at the effects of this declaration, there needs to be continued interdisciplinary research that analyzes the effects of English as a lingua franca in Southeast Asia and official language of ASEAN, especially in light of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to be implemented at the end of 2015. This interdisciplinary non-empirical research paper examines key effects of English as a lingua franca in Southeast Asia across the domains of economics, linguistics, and education, with a special focus on multilingualism. It encourages policymakers, educators, and researchers to consider the breadth and depth of the effects of ASEAN's language policy and makes recommendations for mediating its repercussions.

Keywords - English as a Lingua Franca, ASEAN, Multilingualism, AEC

I. INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is one of the most diverse regions in the world in nearly every dimension of society. Amidst this immense diversity, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) declared English to be its sole official language in 2007. Since its Inception in 1967, ASEAN's process of

making English the sole official language has been largely unsystematic [1].

As Southeast Asia integrates socially, economically, and politically issues of equity, cultural identity, and opportunity are at stake. These effects are vital to consider as this diverse region continues to integrate and seek to be a major player in the globalizing world.

II. ECONOMICS: EQUITY AMIDST DIVERSITY

ASEAN was initially created for political security, but since the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, economics has played an increasing role in ASEAN [2]. Southeast Asia is incredibly diversified economically. According to [3], countries like Singapore and Brunei boast GDP per capita rates as high as 50,000 and 41,662 USD respectively, while countries like Myanmar and Lao PDR have rates as low as 824 and 1,320 USD. While there may not be concrete and simplistic ways that English is connected to economic prosperity, there are several key effects of English as the official language of ASEAN worth considering from an economic standpoint.

While ASEAN works towards a single market and production base along with free trade agreements and the free flow of skilled labor, the role of English in these economic processes is impossible to ignore. Broadly speaking, the fact that ASEAN chose English as the sole official language of ASEAN has

direct effects in terms of translation and accessibility of ASEAN documents.

Most countries with lower levels of English like Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand will not have the same access to information and the economic opportunities that ASEAN affords its citizens. Countries like Thailand have devoted resources to purchase ASEAN flags and poster boards announcing the AEC in 2015; however, very few lay people understand ASEAN's significance. This lack of awareness is likely due-at least in part-to a lack of translation. This contrasts with the European Union, which, since the addition of Croatia in 2013, boasts 24 official languages, as well as a massive translation budget. This commitment to translation is not cheap, however, as the European Commission estimates the yearly budget for translation is nearly \$500 million, which accounts for about 1% of the total EU budget [4].

From 2005-2012, eight Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) were signed regarding the free flow of skilled labor in Engineering Services, Nursing Services, Architectural Services, Surveying Qualifications, Accountancy Services, Medical Practitioners, Dental Practitioners, and Tourism Professionals. These MRAs and the free flow of labor are a compelling example of the impact of English as the sole official language of ASEAN on economic opportunities.

In the Tourism MRA, ASEAN laid out 32 specific job titles open for free flow of labor within ASEAN member countries. The MRA includes competency frameworks that stipulate various expectations for employment throughout ASEAN. For example, in the Food and Beverage Service, many of the higher level administrative and management positions require workers to "[u]se oral English to convey a complex exchange of ideas" and "[r]ead and write English at an advanced level" (p. 131-132) [5].

ASEAN citizens who are poor in English will not qualify for these upper level management positions. Extreme labor migration and "brain drain" may also occur in ASEAN. In the Philippines, a country with high levels of English, there has been significant labor migration all over the world, especially to wealthier nations such as the United States. Reference [6] notes that Filipino nurses account for a quarter of all foreign nurses around the world and can make as much as 5760 USD per month as opposed to as little as 175 USD per month in the Philippines. Increased flow of skilled labor in ASEAN could result in "brain drain" from poorer countries with higher levels of English into wealthier ASEAN nations seeking a better economic situation.

Certain countries in ASEAN that speak English fluently will be disproportionately advantaged with ASEAN's English policy. This includes places like Singapore, which is poised to become the business center of Southeast Asia. While places like Bangkok, Thailand are geographically advantageous in terms of the MICE market (Meetings, Incentives, Convention, and Exhibitions), Singapore's high English levels and advanced economy make it more appealing to many international organizations [7].

If these considerations are not taken seriously, further economic disparities will likely occur between ASEAN members and their citizens.

III. THE CONNECTION OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Southeast Asia is the home of literally hundreds of spoken languages [8]. Article 2 of [9] directly addresses "respect for the different cultures, languages and religions of the peoples of ASEAN, while emphasizing their common values in the spirit of unity in diversity" (p. 7). However, there are few ostensible commitments to the learning and teaching of ASEAN languages and cultures.

Additionally, [10] states the goal to “[s]upport learning of ASEAN languages and promote the exchange of linguists” (p. 2). This minor note in the Socio-cultural Community Blueprint is overshadowed by economic imperatives and rising “English fever”. Inevitably, if English is the sole official language of ASEAN and seen as the international language of business, it will likely displace foci on other Southeast Asian languages within and beyond the region.

Linguists such as Andy Kirkpatrick warn that having English as the sole official language of ASEAN will necessitate loss in linguistic and cultural diversity [11]. This estimation is already evident in the fact that no Asian languages-other than a country’s native language-take a prominent place in Southeast Asian curricula, with the exception of Putonghua [11]. Again, ASEAN’s language policy stands in stark contrast to the European Union with its 24 official languages and in depth multilingualism policies.

With no clear action to learn other Southeast Asian languages throughout ASEAN, cultural preservation is also at stake. Learning English is often coupled with teaching English-or Western-culture as well. Reference [12] states that language study for foreign language students appears meaningless if they know nothing about the culture of the target language. According to [13] (cited in [14]), English language acquisition is directly affected by students’ perceptions of the target culture. Students with positive associations of an English speaking culture have increased English proficiency [13].

A further complication is that ASEAN countries often try to reach native-speaker proficiency, which increases the focus on cultural elements of English. Reference [15] notes, “[i]t was common in language teaching circles to teach learners of English native-speaker cultural norms so that they could use these when learning English. After all, native-speaker proficiency was assumed to be the

goal of language learning and this proficiency included a knowledge of the cultural norms of the native speaker (p. 221).”

These developments have led to an increase in the teaching of Western culture in English classrooms, which may affect Southeast Asian cultural identity.

Effective multilingual and culturally sensitive education will not be an easy task. Unlike in Europe where English is a close cousin to many of the European languages, English is not a cognate of any of the Southeast Asian languages. Therefore, an ethnic minority student in Myanmar, Vietnam, or Thailand will have to learn the native language of that country as well as English, and in the case of Vietnam will also likely have to learn Putonghua. These linguistic and cultural realities pose serious challenges to ASEAN educational systems.

IV. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION

ASEAN educational systems are challenged by how to produce skillful laborers for broadening markets. The key is to produce not only laborers who are well qualified in their fields but also who can communicate effectively with other ASEAN laborers as well. English is increasingly the operative language of ASEAN business. This has led to language teaching and learning in ASEAN that focuses almost exclusively on English. This is not, however, an entirely negative thing.

Using English as a medium language of instruction has proven to help countries like Singapore with effective multilingual policies in place. According to [16], Singapore demonstrates successful bilingual education. However, most of the educational systems in ASEAN are not bilingual and lack the resources to become bilingual. Still, many countries have begun changing curricula to emphasize the English language. English language is a core subject of all the ASEAN

countries except Indonesia, and English is used as an instructional language of Math and Science in Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines [15].

As a result of the growing interest in English in ASEAN, many Southeast Asian countries like Thailand have become fearful of their low levels of English and have instituted several measures of improving English. However, many of these have been mostly rhetorical and ineffective like the statement that 2012 was the “Year of English.” Also, there has been a rush of English teachers, many of whom are unqualified [11].

The ASEAN English policy has also been the impetus behind the shift from teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In some ways ELF communication is more attainable and desirable than EFL because it does not stress being a master of English with native English-speaker fluency or mastery of grammatical structures. Instead, ELF emphasizes a working knowledge meant for communicative competence in multilingual environments. According to [17], in ELF, students learn English to communicate in various—mostly verbal—communication environments with mostly non-native speakers. This is relevant to ASEAN where skillful laborers will increasingly work with a variety of laborers from ASEAN nations who are not native English speakers. This would change the focus of educational systems within ASEAN.

English teaching should prepare students to function effectively in multilingual contexts. Language teaching and learning in some Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand should be reconsidered. Reference [18] studied English Language teaching (ELT) in Thailand and found that the method for teaching English mostly emphasized grammar and pronunciation based on the native-speaker model. The study revealed that teaching students to be masters of English lexical

structures might not be sufficient for preparing students to work in a globalized world [18]. Therefore, educational systems should pay more attention to providing exposure to various English accents and developing students’ intercultural competence in classrooms to achieve this communicative goal [18].

Another challenge facing ASEAN’s English policy is one of the resources. Most schools in Southeast Asia simply do not have the educational resources to empower their students in learning English. Inadequate resources and budget, large class sizes, and low proficiency levels of teachers and students provide challenges to achieving high levels of English use across Southeast Asian society [19]. This is evident even in Thailand where the education budget is one of the highest in the world in terms of percentage of national budget at 20.6% in 2013 [20] (p.65). Intractable political instability in the region also poses threats to effective education. Even countries with higher levels of English with the potential of becoming educational centers in the region such as the Philippines suffer from corruption and lack of necessary resources [21].

There have also been detrimental attempts at educating students in English. Introduction of the English language to children in early childhood is not an effective way to develop language proficiency. This can obstruct children’s learning and may threaten local languages as shown in Malaysia and the Philippines, which have high primary school dropout rates [22]. Malaysia has reverted to using Malay in educational instruction since 2012 as a result of failure of poor and rural Malaysian children in learning Science and Math through English [23]. Also, teachers who have the ability to teach two subjects in English were limited [23].

With such linguistic variety in the region, the effective way to present English as a lingua franca effectively to ASEAN students without threatening local languages and

cultures is through the development of mother tongue and national language proficiencies in childhood before presenting English language. According to [22], the principle of English language learning in a multilingual environment is suggested as the following:

1. Use mother tongue as an instructional language.
2. Introduce English later in the curricula towards the end of primary school.
3. Students' English proficiency goal should be multilingual performance and proficiency, not native proficiency.

This type of multilingual policy is necessary for promoting literacy as well as other important cognitive functioning that develops while learning to read in one's native language [24].

V. CONCLUSION

Southeast Asia is an extraordinarily diverse region. To promote unity amidst diversity, it will be important to consider the effects of ASEAN's policy of English as the sole official language in the ASEAN Charter. Ongoing interdisciplinary research is needed to assess and respond to the issues that arise. If Article 2, section (1) of [24] is taken seriously- "respect for the different cultures, languages and religions of the peoples of ASEAN, while emphasizing their common values in the spirit of unity in diversity" (p. 7)-there needs to be continued action to respond to these issues.

Where there is increased economic disparity, measures need to be taken to support all ASEAN citizens; where there is increasing linguistic and cultural homogenization, there needs to be adjustments in policy and action to back up commitments to Southeast Asia's diverse identity; and, where there is outdated teaching methodology and poor quality education, there needs to be a unified effort to improve education and opportunity across the board for all ASEAN citizens. Commitments to equity, cultural diversity, and high quality education will

mediate the repercussions of ASEAN's language policy.

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(Arranged in the order of citation in the same fashion as the case of Footnotes.)

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