The spread of English in ASEAN: Policies and issues

Ee Ling Low and Ran Ao

RELC Journal, 49(2), 131-148

SAGE Publications

Copyright © 2018 SAGE Publications

This is the author’s accepted manuscript (post-print) of a work that was accepted for publication in the following source:


Notice: Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document.

The final, definitive version of this paper has been published in RELC Journal, Volume 49, Issue 2, July 2018 by SAGE publishing. All rights reserved.
The Spread of English in ASEAN: Policies and Issues

Ee Ling Low & Ran Ao
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University

Abstract
The ASEAN region is home to great ethnic, cultural, political and economic diversity and linguistically, represents a region where both Outer and Expanding Circle varieties of English are spoken. English is designated as the sole working language of ASEAN but in reality, it has a different status and performs very different roles in each ASEAN member state. This paper first provides an overview of the spread of English in Southeast Asia. It then looks at English language policies in each of the Outer and Expanding Circle ASEAN countries, and discusses issues like models and norms of English spoken and intelligibility concerns. The paper concludes by emphasizing that global-local tensions in the use of English in each of the ASEAN contexts should be taken into consideration. There is also the need to strike a balance between the existing tensions in order for the region to compete in the 21st century globally connected landscape.

Keywords
Southeast Asia, Outer Circle, Expanding Circle, language policy, models of English, English as a lingua franca, intelligibility

1. An Overview of the Spread of English in Southeast Asia

The spread of English to Southeast Asia occurred mainly through the forces of colonization, international trade and religion, and has been deepened by the forces of globalization over the last 50 years. English was spread to Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Myanmar through British colonization and to the Philippines as a result of it being a former American colony (1898-1945) (see Kirkpatrick, 2010; Low and Pakir, 2018). In other Southeast Asian countries, namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, English was spread mainly through the driving forces of globalization such as tourism, international trade and international educational mobility (for details, see Kirkpatrick, 2010; Low, forthcoming). Southeast Asia is a region characterized by historical, political, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity where English serves as a means for intra- and international communication. In other words, English does not only serve the purpose of communicating with people outside Southeast Asia but is also being used as a lingua franca among different ethnic groups within the region. Since its formation in 1967, the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have increased from five nations to include ten nations in Southeast Asia. Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter 2007 stipulates that “the working language of ASEAN shall be English” (see Kirkpatrick, 2010).

The spread of English worldwide has been described in terms of three concentric circles (Kachru, 1985, 1992) which comprise the Inner Circle varieties including countries such as the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand where English is used as a native language, Outer
Circle varieties including ex-colonial countries such as Singapore and the Philippines where English is used as a second language, and Expanding Circle varieties including countries such as China and Russia where English is mainly learnt as a foreign language. The Inner Circle countries are said to be “norm-providing” (i.e. determining the English language standards for the other two circles); the Outer Circle countries “norm-developing” (i.e. developing their own standards) and the Expanding Circle countries “norm-dependent” (i.e. depending on the standards set by the Inner Circle countries). Following Kachru’s model, English in Southeast Asia broadly falls under two types, i.e. Outer Circle and Expanding Circle varieties. Outer Circle varieties of English include former colonies or protectorates of Great Britain and the USA, e.g. Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. Expanding Circle varieties include countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

Outer Circle varieties have also been referred to as “New Englishes” (e.g. Platt, Weber and Ho, 1984; Low, 2017). Platt, Weber and Ho (1984) outlined four criteria which a variety of New Englishes fulfills, namely (1) the variety must have developed through the education system; (2) a native variety of English does not exist in the area where it is developed; (3) it is used for different functions in both the written and spoken forms; and (4) it has become localized in terms of its linguistic structure. In order to have developed through the education system, a new variety of English must be taught as a subject in the school curriculum or used as the medium of instruction (hereafter referred to as ‘MoI’) even though there are other main languages spoken in the country. An example is Singapore where English has been used as the MoI in schools since 1987 even though there are three other co-official languages used in the country, namely, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Secondly, New Englishes must develop in countries where a native variety of English did not exist previously. Using Singapore as an example, English started being used in the country when it was colonized by the British in the early part of the 19th century. Next, there must be a wide range of functions for the use of English, both in the written and spoken forms and for purposes of formal and informal communication. Again, English in Singapore fulfills these functions and is used in official domains such as education, government, the media and is used both formally and informally in the written and spoken forms. Finally, New Englishes have localized or nativised linguistic features and this is certainly the case in Singapore where localized variants of the language are evident in the pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary items of Singapore English.

According to Mukherjee (2007), the study of New Englishes is significant because even in the post-independence era, the formal colonial territories have retained English as an official language for use in education, law, administration and the media. Another reason for garnering interest is that even though English is widely used in a wide range of communicative contexts, it is usually acquired in school as a second or third language and only a small proportion of the population speak it as a native language first acquired at home. Finally, as a result of the process of nativisation or localization, these varieties are fast developing their own norms, or as Kachru (1985) terms, are “norm developing” and not reliant on Inner Circle varieties for setting the norms. Alongside the norm-developing status, Kachru (2005: 12) also argues for the “functional
nativeness” of speakers of New Englishes, defined in terms of the range and depth of English use. Range refers to the functional domains where English is used while depth refers to how deeply entrenched English is socially in terms of its sociolinguistic status and the extent to which it is used to express the local identities of its users.

Despite its seminal contribution to the field of World Englishes, Kachru’s model is not without limitations. Some issues have been raised by scholars in the field (see Jenkins, 2009: 20-21 for a more detailed summary). The main issues include: Firstly, rather than being based on how speakers worldwide use and identify with English, Kachru’s model is based on the geographical location and focuses on the history of the spread of English. Secondly, the model fails to consider gray areas between Inner and Outer Circles, and between Outer and Expanding Circles. It therefore fails to recognise the fact that in some Outer Circle countries many people learn English as the first language and use it as the main home language. Singapore is a good case in point. Kirkpatrick (2007: 29-30) also notes that the roles of English in Expanding Circles are underestimated in the Kachruvian model. In some Expanding Circle contexts such as ASEAN and East Asia, with the deepening of globalization, English has come to play increasingly important roles like being used as the medium of instruction in some universities. In spite of these limitations, Kachru’s model has undoubtedly been “the most useful and influential model of the spread of English” (Jenkins, 2009: 18) and is therefore well suited for the purpose of this paper.

Kachru’s Three Circles model recognizes that the Outer Circle varieties are developing their own norms and standards and is an example of the variationist, synchronic paradigm in the study of New Englishes. In a seminal paper, Schneider (2003) proposed a dynamic, diachronic model for the study of New Englishes that divides the developmental phases of New Englishes into five stages viz. foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativisation, endonormative stabilization and differentiation. These phases are based on different parameters such as history and politics, identity construction, sociolinguistics of contact use/attitudes and linguistic/structural effects. According to Schneider’s model, New Englishes in Southeast Asia, i.e. Singapore English, Brunei English, Malaysian English and Philippine English are considered to be more or less in the same phase of endonormative stabilisation. These varieties of English have developed localized features and English serves a functional purpose in the official, administrative, educational and social domains. Schneider’s (2003) dynamic evolutionary model postulates that all emergent and emerging New Englishes have been and are continually being shaped by a uniformed pattern resulting from the interaction between the colonial government and the indigenous population. Over time, these varieties become influenced by the local languages and cultures where they are used and become localized or nativised developing distinctive unique linguistic features of their own.

Expanding Circle varieties in Southeast Asia, mainly spoken in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, however, present a rather different picture. While Myanmar (then Burma) was once a British colony, “its decades of closure to the outside world means that the role of English is radically different from the other countries of the colonial enterprise …” (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 19). It is therefore considered to be an Expanding Circle country. Due to their historical contexts different from those of Outer Circle countries, the English language in these
countries differ both in terms of the range and depth of English used. Like their Outer Circle counterparts, the Expanding Circle countries have experienced tensions in terms of deciding on which standards and which norms of English should be used and the prominence of English which is subject to changes in governmental language policies.

In the Expanding Circle countries, however, English is mainly learnt as a foreign language in schools and is only used in limited domains such as tourism, foreign trade and international joint ventures. Despite the limited use of English in these Expanding Circle Southeast Asian countries, one can predict that the emergence of distinct varieties of English in these countries may arise over time given the rapid pace of globalization and economic growth in the region which is likely to precipitate the widespread use of English.

To date, there has been an increasing amount of research on varieties of English in Southeast Asia, particularly the Outer Circle varieties such as Singapore English, Malaysian English and Philippine English. However, some issues may be noted particularly in the focal areas of research. Firstly, there has been asymmetric foci on varieties of English in this region. The Outer Circle varieties of English, Singapore English in particular, have been considerably well documented (e.g. Wong, 2014; Low and Pakir, 2018; Wee, 2018, among many others). By contrast, the Expanding Circle varieties of English (e.g. Cambodian English and Indonesian English) (see Lowenberg, 1991; Hashim, Yee, and Pich, 2014) have received much less research attention. Secondly, while there have been monographs and compilations of conference papers and proceedings on English in Southeast Asia (e.g. Noss, 1983; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Low and Hashim, 2012), most of these works focus on English in individual ASEAN countries rather those focusing on ASEAN as a region. To date, few are like Kirkpatrick’s 2010 work on English as a lingua franca in ASEAN that presents a holistic look at the English used in ASEAN as a region. This paper examines the spread of English in ASEAN taken as a region from the perspectives of language policies and issues concerning models/norms of English and questions of intelligibility. Having provided an overview of the spread of English in Southeast Asia, we will next look at the English language policies in each of the ASEAN countries.

2. English Language Policies in ASEAN

The discussion of the English language policies will be divided into those that fall under the Outer Circle Countries first, mainly Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, followed by those in the rest of the Expanding Circle ASEAN countries.

Outer Circle ASEAN countries

Malaysia

In the case of Malaysia, the language policy may be described as having a “flip-flopping” tendency between Malay and English depending on periods of its history and the political power governing it. The takeover of Penang by the East India Company in 1786 marked the beginning of the British
colonization in the Malay Peninsula. Slightly more than three decades after the takeover of Penang, the British gained control of Singapore and Malacca in 1819 and 1824 respectively. In 1826, the British government formed the Straits Settlements comprising Penang, Singapore and Malacca (Platt, Weber and Ho, 1983: 8). The Straits Settlements as an administrative region propelled the need for the establishment of English-medium schools in the early 19th century to cope with the demands of the English-speaking government. The establishment of these schools represented a critical milestone in the spread of English in the region.

During British colonial rule (before 1957), English played an important role in Malaya. It served as the language of the government, commerce, education and the media and it also symbolized power and prestige. English began to be taught from the 19th century in the English-medium schools in mainly free and mission schools (Platt and Weber, 1980: 34-41). Free schools admitted students regardless of their ethnic and religious backgrounds and were partially funded by the government with the students having to pay school fees. These included Penang Free School founded in 1816, Singapore Free School established in 1823 (which was later named Raffles Institution), and others established a few years later in Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and Taiping. The mission schools were set up and managed by mainly Christian missionaries that received grants from the government. The number of English-medium schools in the Federated Malay States and Singapore reached 82 by 1931, with a total number of 28,071 pupils enrolled (Low and Tan, 2016). As the students in the English-medium schools mainly comprised children from the wealthier Chinese and Indian families as well as some royal families, these schools were regarded as elitist. There were also Malay vernacular schools attended by the majority of the Malay children, Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools which were also well attended by their respective ethnic groups in general.

The prominent status of English, however, became threatened in post-independent Malaysia where “English was rejected as it represented the language of colonial powers” (Hanewald, 2016: 183). Consequently, tensions among English, Malay, Chinese, Tamil and the other languages spoken by minority groups began to emerge. In 1957, Malaysia declared Malay (also known as Bahasa Melayu) its national language to ensure that all Malaysian ethnic groups could emotionally identify with the language (Azirah, 2009). During the first ten years of Malaysia’s independence (1957-1967), English was still considered prominent due to the Malay-English bilingual policy introduced by the Barnes Commission of 1951. However, with Malay being made the official language in Peninsular Malaysia (1967), Sabah (1973) and Sarawak (1985), the prominent role of English in Malaysia gradually diminished. Malay became the language used in government offices as well as official ceremonies though English was still frequently used in domains such as the High Courts, Federal Court and Court of Appeal (Powell, 2012: 249-250). English was also used for commercial law-related dealings and for civil proceedings. In the rural areas of present-day Malaysia, Malay and other languages are widely spoken while English is often regarded as foreign and mainly used in language classrooms in these areas (Low and Tan, 2016). In urban areas, by contrast, English (both oral and written) is still a language widely used, particularly in the private sectors. Besides being bilingual in Malay and English, many Malaysians are also able to speak
other ethnic languages or dialects. Many wealthy Malaysian families send their children for extra private classes in English so as to be able to master the language in order to gain admission to top English-speaking universities.

In the educational sphere, post-independence, the government converted all English-medium schools to Malay-medium schools. In addition, Malay became the MoI for many university courses by 1983. English was thus changed from the MoI into a compulsory subject in schools, i.e. from when children start school at the age of six through their secondary school years. As mentioned earlier, vernacular schools also existed in the Malaysian education system, where Malay, Mandarin or Tamil were used as the MoI with English taught as a compulsory subject. While the Malaysian government is cognizant of the importance of English for the country to function effectively in a globally connected world, they have to contend with Malay nationalists wishing to promote the Malay language. Following the Education Act of 1996, English was reintroduced as the MoI for Mathematics and Science subjects in 2003 for students in their first year of primary and secondary schools. However, after just a few years of implementation, the government reversed the decision when they considered such as a policy might disadvantage students from rural areas and decided to revert to adopting Bahasa Malaysia as the MoI for Mathematics and Science in 2009. English thus remains the MoI for Mathematics and Science only at higher levels of education (e.g. universities). The Malaysian government has, in recent years, taken steps to implement a policy to make a pass grade in English compulsory for students who take the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examinations (i.e. Malaysian Certificate of Education, equivalent to the Cambridge O-Level examinations) till 2016, with a view to raising Malaysians’ overall English standards (Stareducate Team, 2013).

Singapore

While Malaysia and Singapore shared a brief period of joint governance called the merger from 1963 to 1965, Singapore’s English language policy post-independence took on a very different trajectory compared to its neighbour. After Singapore’s independence in 1965, English was declared as one of the country’s four co-official languages, together with three other local languages, i.e. Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. In 1966, Singapore implemented a bilingual education policy following the recommendation of the All-Party Committee set up in 1959 to look into the multilingual issue of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country. According to the original bilingual policy, if English was the MoI, students were required to learn an ethnically ascribed second language which was either Chinese, or Malay or Tamil. If the MoI was Chinese, Malay or Tamil (applicable to vernacular schools), English was the second language students were required to learn in schools (see Platt, Weber and Ho, 1983: 10). As English was regarded as an ethnically neutral language which was owned by none of the ethnic groups, it gradually became the linguistic tool different racial groups used for cross-ethnic communication.

This led to the strengthening of the status of English but gradual weakening of the position of indigenous languages in Singapore. The indigenous languages taught to students in schools were usually not the pupils’ mother tongues but the standard varieties of the ethnic mother tongue.
languages. For instance, the nationwide ‘Speak Mandarin Campaign’ first launched in 1979 has successfully promoted the widespread use of Mandarin even in informal domains like local eating places known as “hawker centers” but has led to a major linguistic shift away from other Chinese dialects (Rubdy, 2001: 342-343). Another example is the official listing of Tamil as the ethnically-ascribed mother tongue for Indian students and this has led to the decline in the use of other mother tongue languages spoken by the Indian Singaporeans (e.g. Hindi and Malayalam) (see Pakir, 1991: 168). Due to the “English-knowing bilingualism” (Pakir, 1991) education policy, English has “emerged as a language used at home and may even be considered the de facto ‘mother tongue’ for some Singaporeans” (Low and Pakir, 2018: 45). Unlike the English language policy in post-independent Malaysia which led to its declining prominence in Malaysia, Singapore’s post-independence policies veered increasingly and favourably towards English. In 1987, English was adopted as the MoI for all schools, a policy that has remained unchanged ever since.

Singapore’s English-knowing bilingual policy has been credited with the country’s ability to allow its citizens to achieve a high level of proficiency of English ensuring international competitiveness. At the same time, literacy in one’s ethnically ascribed mother tongue is also seen to help Singaporeans acquire the cultural ballast that tie them to their roots. However, the policy does not come without challenges. One challenge has to do with language shift resulting from the growing dominance of English which may lead to endangerment or even the death of mother tongue languages that have not been designated as the ethnically ascribed mother tongues (e.g. Chinese dialects). Another challenge concerns English language variation that has led to the emergence of a localized, colloquial variety of English known as Singlish. Singaporeans identify strongly with this variety as they feel that it helps them express their national identity. Yet, its widespread proliferation especially amongst those who have not mastered the standard variety of the language has raised concerns about the falling standards of English in Singapore. To address this concern, the Singapore government introduced the ‘Speak Good English Movement’ in 2000. Since Singlish is still widely spoken in Singapore, as research shows (e.g. Wong, 2014; Tan, 2017), and due to the fact that it is “a variety replete with localized cultural and linguistic features” (Low and Pakir, 2018: 48), issues of identity and intelligibility arise (for detailed discussions, see Wong, 2014; Low and Pakir, 2018; Wee, 2018). In order for Singapore’s English-knowing bilingual policy to remain sustainable in the long run, issues related to loss of dialects, continued widespread use of Singlish and the effect it has on standards of English have to be heavily weighted and considered.

**Brunei**

Brunei is another Outer Circle country where English has gained considerable prominence since its independence in 1984. The 1960s saw the increase in the number of both primary and secondary schools, teachers and pupils, including both Malay- and English-medium schools (Jones, 2012). However, the question of MoI still remained unresolved with different schools using different MoI. For example, the government schools used both English and Malay as MoIs with textbooks supplied from Britain for the English-medium schools and textbooks from Malaysia for Malay-
medium schools. Schools for the Chinese community have their own MoI (i.e. Mandarin) with textbooks imported from Taiwan while religious schools also had a small number of students taught using Arabic as the MoI. The MoI remained unresolved until 1984 when the Education System of Brunei was introduced. This initiative emphasized the importance of solidarity and nation building, and tried to satisfy those lobbying for the continued prominence of Malay while still acknowledging the need for English for global competitiveness. A Malay-English bilingual education system was introduced instead of a Malay-only educational model. The deepening of internationalization and Bruneians’ increasing demand for English-medium programmes since 1984 gave English such prominence that “the majority of programmes in [the] institutions [of higher learning] are English medium, reflecting the actual demand from students and employers” (Jones, 2012: 184).

A new national education system was introduced in Brunei in January 2009 meant as a blueprint for education for the 21st century. Locally known as SPN21, the new system further emphasized the increasingly important role of English for preparing children for the 21st century. Mathematics and Science were now being learnt from Primary 1 through the medium of English. Parents tend to choose English-medium preschools and kindergartens for their children’s early education in the hope of better preparing their children for primary school. Today, it is observed that some of the new generation in Brunei, particularly the well-educated elites, have shifted to using English predominantly (Jones, 2012; Noor Azam, 2005). As Noor Azam (2005: 239) notes, a Bruneian “could now be defined as a Malay-English bilingual” reflecting the success in the twin emphases of building solidarity whilst allowing the country to remain globally relevant and progressive in the 21st century.

The Philippines

The English language in the Philippines has a slightly different history and development from those of the countries just described as it was an American colony rather than a British one. The spread of English in the Philippines “during just four decades of the American regime was considered unprecedented, compared to the lack of spread of Spanish after more than 300 years of Spanish colonization” (Lim, 2017: 451, citing Gonzalez, 1997: 28). As a case in point, scholars compared the year 1901 when no Filipino spoke English with the year 1918 in which approximately 47% of Filipinos claimed to be able to speak English and 55.6% claimed that they could read and write English (see Bolton and Bautista, 2008: 4; Gonzalez, 1997: 27). After the Philippines gained full independence from the USA in 1946, English continued to be taught from Grade 1 and served as the government’s official language. In 1974, English began to be used as the MoI alongside the national language, i.e. Filipino (Madrunio, Martin and Plata, 2016). The bilingual education policy served as a balancing act between “the legitimate aspirations of nationalism (…) and an equally legitimate desire to maintain English as a language of wider communication in order to gain more access to the benefits of science and technology through this second language” (Madrunio, Martin and Plata, 2016: 254). According to the bilingual education policy, Filipino and English were reserved as the respective MoIs for different subjects studied.
from Grade 1 to the fourth year of high school. English was used as the MoI for Mathematics and Science subjects while Filipino was used as the MoI for all other subjects (Gonzalez, 1990: 153). This policy, however, has engendered intense debates on the MoI till today. Koo (2008) succinctly lists areas these debates have centered around. Proponents of the policy argue that (1) English plays an important role of social unification and integration; (2) English is the most important international language; and (3) shifting away from English brings about practical problems, whereas opponents argue that (1) “English language is a colonizing tool” and (2) “English brings damaging effects to Filipino culture” (see Koo, 2008: 22-23 for details).

English is playing an increasingly important role in present-day Philippine society. It is not only needed by the Philippine elites but also by all other socio-economic groups (Kirkpatrick, 2010) due to the demand for English-speaking personnel for jobs at all levels. More employment opportunities for the English-speaking have been created by the government at home through the development of the call-centre industry (Bolton, 2010). In addition, around 2 million Filipinos are working overseas and need to be proficient in English for their jobs. In fact, English is now considered to be more useful than Filipino by a large number of non-Tagalog-speaking Filipinos who are from different socio-economic backgrounds, as high degrees of English proficiency are required for local and overseas jobs alike (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

**Expanding Circle ASEAN Countries**

**Indonesia and Thailand**

Indonesia and Thailand are the two Expanding Circle countries that are founding members of ASEAN. After Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch in 1945, English became the first foreign language taught in schools. At present, it still remains a foreign language taught and learnt from junior high school to university. However, as indicated in Sadtono (2007), English is used in some schools in larger cities as the MoI from as early as the pre-school kindergarten years. Although Indonesia is the only ASEAN country where English has not been made a compulsory subject in primary schools, it is quite commonly taught as an elective subject in schools (Siti, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 2010). The status of English language teaching in Indonesian universities is not quite clear-cut. English is taught as a subject in some non-English departments but not taught in others; it is used as the MoI in some universities but totally excluded in others (see Sadtono, 2007). Due to the fact that English has only been taught as a foreign language, the number of Indonesians proficient in English remains low (Kirkpatrick, 2010) and the domains of English use is limited to only a few sectors such as education and tourism.

Largely similar to the situation in Indonesia, English is currently taught as the primary foreign language in all Thai government schools. With the English language being regarded as “the international lingua franca and language of modernity” (Kirkpatrick, 2010: 49), the demand for the language has seen an increase in Thailand. At present, English is the foreign language most widely taught in Thailand and a required subject for the National University Entrance Examination (Darasawang, 2007). Since Thailand became a member nation of ASEAN, English has gained an
increasingly important status and its significant role has been a recurrent subject of debate. Nonetheless, the important role of English has been openly acknowledged by the Thai government, which is manifested in initiatives such as ‘English Speaking Year 2012’ (see Baker and Jarunthawatchai, 2017). With a foreign language status in Thailand, English is “characterised as a lingua franca used to connect economically, culturally and politically with the rest of the region and world” (Baker, 2015: 207). Having said that, in many urban settings in Thailand, English is in fact increasingly serving the purpose of both inter- and intra-cultural communication (Baker and Jarunthawatchai, 2017). The deepening of globalization has seen expansion of the range and depth of English use in Thailand, such as the rapid growth in the number of Thai-English bilinguals and English-medium programmes in schools and universities, and the increasing use of English-mediated e-communication (for more details, see Huebner, 2006; Glass, 2009; Keyuravong, 2010; Sargeant, Tagg, and Ngampramuan, 2012; Baker and Jarunthawatchai, 2017).

Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia

The ASEAN membership later expanded to include another four Expanding Circle countries, namely Vietnam (1995), Laos (1997), Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999). Not according to the chronology of their membership in joining ASEAN, these countries have come to be commonly called the CLMV countries. Research on documenting English in the CLMV countries has been scant though there is evidence of burgeoning scholarship on the topic.

English was thought to be the language of the enemy and was banned in Vietnam when the Ho Chi Minh administration came to power in 1975 after the Vietnam War. The introduction of economic reforms in Vietnam in 1986 and the increasing forces of globalization have resulted in a resurgence of interest in learning English. English has since become popular not only among students but also among many others such as diplomats, army officers, senior police officers, doctors, engineers and even government officials (Ho and Wong, 2004). English is now a compulsory subject from Primary 3 with Vietnamese as the MoI (Kirkpatrick, 2010). It has become the most widely learnt foreign language in Vietnam, with more than 90% of children learning it (Baker and Giacchino-Baker, 2003). Besides education, other sectors like tourism and manufacturing have also seen a growing demand for English (Le and O’Harrow, 2007). English proficiency has therefore become a prerequisite for those who intend to seek employment opportunities in the foreign companies operating in Vietnam.

In Laos, English is also the first foreign language taught in schools. As required by the Ministry of Education, English is offered as a subject starting from Primary 3 despite the shortage of qualified teachers and suitable course materials (Phommanimith, 2008). In neighbouring Myanmar, the spread of English began in 1886 when the British occupied the country, about 15 years after Malaya was taken by Britain and over ten years before the United States annexed the Philippines (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Low, forthcoming). After Myanmar (then called Burma) gained independence from Britain in 1948, English became the major foreign language taught in primary and secondary schools with Burmese as the MoI. Burmese also became the MoI for all university subjects between 1962 and 1988 with the status of English greatly undermined as a consequence.
As Kirkpatrick (2010: 53) observes, the use of English in Myanmar is still “restricted to the elite and to a small number of domains, mostly involving the few NGOs and aid programmes which remain”. This situation is to a great extent shared by Cambodia where French and English became the main foreign languages in 1989. Later, English replaced French and became the preferred foreign language and the first foreign language taught in school, as Cambodia resumed its involvement in international activities (e.g. joining ASEAN) and with the arrival of UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) (Kirkpatrick, 2010). English proficiency is not only an essential prerequisite for employment with foreign agencies but also for those seeking employment with all foreign aid organizations and NGOs (including French agencies) operating in Cambodia (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Moore and Bounchan, 2010).

As evident in this section, the prominence or decline of English in the ASEAN region is closely linked to the language policies implemented by the individual governments. In both the Outer and Expanding Circle countries, the prominence assigned to the role of English is hampered by the need to balance between upholding the language of solidarity spoken by the indigenous population and the importance of English as a tool for positioning the country to compete in an English-speaking globally connected world where English is a prerequisite for international higher education opportunities and ultimately, for securing jobs locally and internationally. As a consequence, it is not uncommon to see flip-flops in language policy with regard to the prominence assigned to English vis-a-vis the national language of the country. Singapore stands out in its pragmatic stance of achieving the best of both worlds with its policy of English-knowing bilingualism ensuring that Singaporeans are highly proficient in English while still being able to speak their ethnically ascribed mother tongues for cultural ballast.

3. Issues of Models and Intelligibility of English in ASEAN

As discussed in section 1 of this paper, following Kachru’s (1985, 1992) World Englishes paradigm, in the contexts of ASEAN, Outer Circle countries (i.e. Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines) are norm-developing while Expanding Circle countries (i.e. Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia) are norm-dependent. It follows then that Outer Circle countries will adopt the norms they develop, i.e. endonormative models, rather than rely on Inner Circle norms/models (e.g. British English or American English) whereas Expanding Circle countries will depend on Inner Circle norms/models, i.e. exonormative models, rather than develop their own models. The norm-developing and norm-depending phenomena have been subject to empirical testing in recent work on features-based studies of varieties of English across the three circles (see Low 2010, 2015 for work on the pronunciation features of English in the three different circles). What these recent studies show is that while there is clear evidence that Outer Circle varieties are norm-developing, the situation in the Expanding Circle is less straightforward. For example, Chinese English was found to share pronunciation properties (in rhythmic patterning)
with both Inner and Outer Circle varieties. This suggests that there is now a tendency to look to both Inner and Outer Circle varieties for norms.

Norms for English around the world have been discussed from the perspectives of different paradigms such as World Englishes (WE) (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 2006; Pakir, 2010), English as an International Language (EIL) (e.g. McKay, 2002; Low, 2015) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2010). Due to the constraints of space, we will focus on discussing three norms in this paper, namely exonormative, endonormative model and ELF norms.

The native-speaker model (i.e. exonormative model), nativized model (i.e. endonormative model) and lingua franca models have been discussed in previous scholarship (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2006) as possible models for English language teaching in Outer and Expanding Circle countries. In discussing the native-speaker/exonormative models, Kirkpatrick (2006: 72-75) examines some advantages and disadvantages of choosing exonormative norms. First, they are advantageous for native-speaker teachers who are seen as providing the correct model and standard. However, Kirkpatrick (2006) also points out that the choice of exonormative norms only benefits a minority of native-speaker teachers and not the huge number of teachers from the Outer and Expanding Circle countries. Second, the choice of a native-speaker model privileges learners who learn English for the goal of understanding the native speaker’s mindset and culture. Again, as Kirkpatrick points out, this group of learners represent only a minority in the Outer and Expanding Circle countries where most people learn English in order to communicate with other non-native speakers (international, non-native communication) and amongst themselves (intra-national communication). Third, the adoption of a native-speaker model is meant to ensure international intelligibility. Among other counter-arguments, Kirkpatrick, citing Smith and Rafiqzad’s (1983) study, points out that native-speaker varieties have been shown to be less intelligible than nativized varieties in some international settings. Another study (Hung, 2002) shows that learners who are native speakers of syllable-timed languages such as Chinese and Malay are likely to find speakers of syllable-timed varieties of English more intelligible than native speakers of stress-timed languages such as British and Australian English.

The disadvantages to embracing exonormative models are obvious, and two are highlighted for discussion. Firstly, unless learners are taught by native speakers and even then, ideally live in the place where the native-speaker model is constantly spoken, e.g. Britain, it is unrealistic that they will sound like native speakers of British English. A study by Suppiah (2002) showed empirically that Singaporean pupils spoke exactly like their teachers. Secondly, teachers who are not native speakers of English will feel insecure when they are required to teach a model they themselves are not speakers of and may lose self-confidence as teachers (Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Arguably, a nativized or endonormative model brings the following advantages, particularly in the Outer Circle countries: (a) it is a relevant and appropriate model to teachers and learners alike in the sense that they are not seen as speakers of non-standard varieties anymore but models of their own nativised varieties; (b) choosing such a model empowers teachers (e.g. they can serve as role models for their students; their linguistic backgrounds and resources are now highly valued)
Kirkpatrick, 2006). Advantageous as it may sound, this, however, may be idealistic and impracticable. Kirkpatrick himself also acknowledges the fact that while some countries do fear that learning English will necessarily result in the adoption of Anglo-American values, they still choose to adhere to a native-speaker or exonormative model for English language teaching. As for the Expanding Circle ASEAN countries, the advantages of adopting a nativized or endonormative model are not so obvious as English is mainly taught as a foreign language (Kirkpatrick, 2006).

The spread of English worldwide has seen the emergence of English as a worldwide lingua franca, e.g. in Europe, throughout India, in Africa and in Asia. The great majority of learners in ASEAN today are learning English as a lingua franca to communicate with people from within the region. This has led to research on using an ELF model for English in Outer and Expanding Circle countries (e.g. Kachru, 1996; Jenkins, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2006, 2010; Pakir, 2001; Seidlhofer, 2001). Building on Kachru’s (1996: 908) concept of English as “lingua franca with multiple identities”, Pakir (2001: 79) discusses “the role of English as a configurer of multiple cultures and identities” and looks at how the application of the lingua franca concept to the sociolinguistic realities of English may facilitate understanding of English language education in Singapore. Kirkpatrick (2006), drawing from Jenkins (2000) on EIL and Seidlhofer (2001) on ELF, argues for a lingua franca model for the Outer and Expanding circle countries.

There are several reasons why the adoption of a lingua franca model is beneficial for learners of ELF and for teachers as well (see Kirkpatrick, 2006: 78-80). Firstly, teachers of English do not need to teach exonormative or native-speaker models which they themselves do not speak. Teachers are hence relieved of negative feelings resulting from comparison of their own English with externally imposed norms. Secondly, teachers can significantly expand the cultural content of their teaching rather than just focusing on Inner Circle cultures. Teachers can also include cultural content from other Outer or Expanding Circle countries whose people their students are most likely to communicate with. For example, for learners of English in an ASEAN country, the curriculum can have a primary focus on the cultures of ASEAN. Thirdly, the model can serve as a marker of identity, and teachers and learners will have the true ownership of the model that reflects their own cultural norms.

Kirkpatrick (2006) emphasizes that a lingua franca model should not be seen as a single standard free from cultural influences, which is where ELF differs from EIL. Rather, speakers of lingua franca English focus on communication and free themselves from standard monolithic norms. In addition, ELF “is much more than an ESP and it is much more than a register” (Kirkpatrick, 2006: 80) as communication in ELF “has to be seen in terms of accommodation between codes and in a multilingual context” (Bamgbose, 2001: 359). As the major role of English in ASEAN is to serve as a lingua franca and the majority of people are learning English to achieve a functional proficiency for using English as a lingua franca, the lingua franca model might be a potential candidate for the ASEAN contexts.

In this paper, we would like to move away from speaker-dominated norms discussed above to listener-dominated norms if the aim is to facilitate intelligibility. As English plays an increasingly important role among the interconnected ASEAN countries, new English lingua
francas are emerging. In this context, intelligibility will play a key role to ensure effective communication both within ASEAN countries and between ASEAN and other regions in the world. Three basic levels of intelligibility have been identified in Smith and Nelson (1985) and Smith (1992): recognizing words, comprehending utterances, and understanding meanings behind words and utterances. Intelligibility of Southeast Asian Englishes have been investigated in a few studies such as Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) and Deterding (2013). The study conducted by Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) investigated pronunciation features of English as a lingua franca spoken in Southeast Asia and explored the role of each feature in causing misunderstandings and maintaining intelligibility. The study involved two speakers from each of the ten ASEAN countries, with twenty speakers in total. The speakers were recorded in conversations in groups of three or four, all from a different ASEAN country. Their analyses of the recorded speech identified both shared and unshared features of pronunciation of the speakers. Their findings show that some of the participants’ shared non-standard features in fact enhanced intelligibility and that some of the misunderstandings or communication breakdown are caused only by those unshared features of pronunciation. Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) therefore conclude that a variety of English well adapted to the needs of ASEAN users will continue to become established with many of its own pronunciation features. However, they highlight that how to maintain intelligibility of the variety for listeners from outside ASEAN will remain an issue. They point out that “Perhaps the most important skill, however, is the ability to accommodate one’s pronunciation to the needs of one’s listeners” (Deterding and Kirkpatrick, 2006: 406).

This ability to practice speech accommodation is well captured in Levis’ (2005) speaker-listener intelligibility matrix and Low’s adaptation of the matrix which she terms “listener-dominated norms” (see Low, 2015: 130). Low (2015: 129) maintains that “the speaker should try, as far as possible, to achieve intelligibility with the listener. In other words, the onus is on the speaker to try to make himself/herself intelligible to their listeners.” The dictation of norms is given to the listener where which norms to adopt depends on where the listener comes from. Thus, if the listener is from the Inner Circle countries, then Inner Circle norms should be adopted; when communicating with listeners from Outer Circle countries, Outer Circle norms should be upheld while Expanding Circle norms should be adhered to when the listener is from the Expanding Circle countries. Applying this listener-dominated matrix of intelligibility to the context of ASEAN, it would imply that “no one variety or varieties from one circle can be said to be dictating the norms for the varieties from the other circles” (Low, 2015: 130). Rather, there is a need to consciously teach and learn the norms of the different varieties spoken in the region so as to communicate effectively intra-regionally and even internationally. For this model to work effectively in ASEAN (and beyond), English language course developers and instructors will have to make concerted efforts to design materials that consciously expose learners to the linguistic features of not just the Outer and Expanding Circle varieties spoken in the ASEAN region but also those spoken in the Inner Circle countries so that they can communicate effectively at the local, regional and global levels.
4. Striking New Balances for Global Competitiveness as a Region

This paper has provided an overview of the spread of English to Southeast Asia, discussed the different policies pertaining to the use of the English language in the ASEAN countries and examined issues surrounding the norms of English use and concerns about intelligibility matters. In this section, we would like to offer our perspectives on areas requiring further research on English use in ASEAN. While we are aware that ASEAN adopts English as its working language and that English is playing an increasingly important role in ASEAN, we are also aware that obvious tensions exist. A case in point is the need to master a high level of proficiency in English in order to achieve the global competencies needed to function in the interconnected English-speaking world while having to cater to the needs of maintaining the region’s many indigenous languages and localized varieties of English for purposes of solidarity amongst its people. From the global perspective, it is high on the agenda of each ASEAN country to develop its people’s proficiency in English in order for the region as a whole to compete efficiently in the international arena and to progress economically. From the local perspective, however, global interests may be restrained by local political and socio-economic realities such as those we have discussed earlier that downplay the prominence of English in certain countries. Further research is needed to articulate these global-local tensions as a region so that ASEAN can strategically take a unified position on the role of English regionally.

The second research area concerns looking into some urgent balances that need to be achieved and maintained with regard to the use of English in ASEAN. Applying Low and Pakir’s (2018: 49-51) discussion on new balances that have to be achieved for English in Singapore for future-readiness, some of these balances warrant further investigation for English in ASEAN in order for the region to be globally relevant and competitive. To elaborate, the issue of language shift versus maintenance is of primary concern for the ASEAN community. The rise in the prominence of English may mean that the indigenous populations experience language shifts and in the worse-case scenario, language loss or death. This is no trivial matter as ASEAN’s rich linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity contributes to its uniqueness as a region. Next, the issue of whether English is a tool for communication in the region or whether it can now be considered a lingua franca that binds the different communities living in the region also requires urgent investigation.

English is undoubtedly the key to socio-economic advancement but the pertinent issue of whether each member country has equal access to high quality teaching and learning of English is definitely worthy of closer analysis. The present age of the fourth industrial revolution where technological advances have made possible the breakneck speed in the transfer and creation of new knowledge and innovations and where English is the main language used in a digitally-mediated world makes it all the more urgent that access to English is quickly and equitably distributed across the region. For this to take place, ASEAN as a network needs to band together on the issue of access to English in ASEAN to ensure that no country is left behind and that the quest for the achievement of sustainable development goals moves from rhetoric to reality.
References


