

## Book Review

### **English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN: A Multilingual Model**

Andy Kirkpatrick. Hong Kong University Press. 2010. 236 pp. ISBN:  
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Reviewed by:

Simon Scanlon

*Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong*

Developments in globalisation have resulted in a complex interplay between the spread of, and demand for English to the extent that there are now over 800 million users of English in Asia. Considering that it is an official language in only four of the ten member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), it reveals much about the language's status and power, as well as the region's social, economic and political aspirations.

Andy Kirkpatrick's *English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN* traces the language's historical background and its linguistic features, arguing that an ASEAN variety of English is emerging. More than purely being a means of communication, language is also a marker of who we are. The author successfully incorporates issues of identity and empowerment as a central theme: what it means to be an English user, and what it allows access to. He also looks into how education policy might best move forward in order to narrow the gap between national and global needs.

Divided in three parts, Kirkpatrick first documents the historical context and each ASEAN country's curriculum development. Protecting the national language alongside promoting English has been problematic for several member states, for example Singapore which boasts high proficiency in English but falling literacy rates in one of its official languages, Chinese. Kirkpatrick suggests that demand for English has been ever-increasing because newly independent states must modernize, and the facilitators of this are "universities, banks and factories, not temples and mosques" (p. 45). Thus, whilst acknowledging the sense of empowerment provided by a global language, Kirkpatrick rightly suggests that minor languages and dialects are at great risk of being eradicated.

In Part 2, Kirkpatrick's analysis of conversations between ASEAN speakers reveal that there are numerous shared phonological features, communicative strategies and an absence of local forms that render interactions surprisingly effective. To this end, Kirkpatrick favours the social approach whereby "the goal is functional proficiency" (p. 157). Drawing on phonologist Jennifer Jenkins' (2000) lingua franca core of essential and non-essential features of pronunciation, he urges less reliance on native speaker (NS) forms. Instead, a regional variety should be allowed to thrive and local pragmatic norms accepted.

This has important implications for teaching because it renders the recruitment of NS teachers unnecessary if ELF is to develop as a World English in its own right. However, Kirkpatrick leaves unanswered the question of how educators should capture

and teach ASEAN ELF. No teaching materials, benchmark or ‘standards’ will exist once the NS is removed. Inevitably, questions will arise as to what is acceptable English, with ASEAN ELF at risk of turning into a creole.

Attitudes need to change, and dropping the NS model is the only way ASEAN ELF speakers can move forward. Change must start from within if the current situation of high failure rates and dominance of English is to be reversed. Yet parental pressure is not to be underestimated as their focus is on enhancing their children’s career prospects, rather than fostering national identity. The demand for English is such that the learner’s first language is often sacrificed in its place. Clearly, governments and educators have much work to do before top down policy and bottom-up demand can be balanced.

The underlying sociological aspect of language use and policy in Asia is perhaps the most intriguing part of the author’s work. Ultimately, the spread of English occurred because of who spoke it, rather than how many (Crystal, 2012). Even after the decline of the British Empire, its colonial legacy is firmly entrenched right into the twenty first century.

Kirkpatrick raises some valid points in proposing a language education model for ASEAN’s multilingual nations, yet it is questionable whether it can be applied to those where the national language is strong, for example Thailand and Indonesia. In the context of China’s dominance in Asia, perhaps some discussion might have been directed at the role of English in counterbalancing Mandarin. As ASEAN continues to grow as a regional economic and political entity, its use of English will be central in distinguishing it from its more powerful neighbours.

*English as a Lingua Franca in ASEAN* is an accessible and insightful read for educators, policy makers, future EFL professionals and general readers. It provides valuable background information, assesses the current situation and attempts to envisage the road ahead for a region where English perhaps operates at two speeds. As English continues to creep into even the most robustly monolingual societies, this well thought-out book will encourage debate among a variety of academic fields including some beyond linguistics.

### **About the reviewer**

Simon Scanlon teaches academic literacy courses at the University of Hong Kong.

### **References**

- Crystal, D. (2012). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.