

English as a lingua franca in higher education in Malaysia

Azirah Hashim

Department of English Language, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Gerhard Leitner

Institute of English Philology, Free University Berlin, Germany

This paper examines the role of English in higher education in Malaysia within the context of Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and the global challenges the country faces. It surveys the uses, functions of and demand for English in Malaysia and the region. The practices and needs of higher education institutions are contextualized within the progression from secondary education upwards and the history of educational policies. This paper discusses English needs of higher education as set inside multilingual contexts where English functions as the default language. The nature of English in Malaysia and across Southeast Asia is highly diverse and variable and speakers may use stable and creative localized forms such as Malaysian, Singaporean and Philippine English. The tension between these national or regional varieties and the desired command of English are addressed. It is proposed that English as a lingua franca may be the best option for higher education institutions although one will still need to restrict it to semi-formal spoken contexts and adopt a form of international English for writing, especially academic writing. Whatever target variety is thought to be the most adequate, English cannot be dissociated from culture and pragmatic norms. Teaching and learning therefore require an openness to and acceptance of diversity way beyond immediate comprehension.

Keywords: ELF; multilingualism; higher education; ASEAN; Malaysia

Introduction

This paper examines the role of English in higher education in Malaysia within the context of Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and the global challenges the country faces. Surveying the different roles of English in the region, it argues that Malaysia cannot but adopt a dual dialect approach. If Malaysia and other ASEAN countries are unwilling to accept and develop the localized forms of English, it could consider adopting English as a lingua franca in most formal oral contexts and use international English for writing. The casual domain would then be left to its own. That position would have a considerable impact on higher education as teaching targets a diverse student population and academic writing a potentially global readership. It is not entirely clear if and how higher education should integrate, reject or add to the input that its Malaysian student population brings along with it. It is for that reason that we look at the input that is provided from secondary education which is essentially exo-normative and implies native English norms. There is a gap between the needs of higher and secondary school education. This paper addresses a very real problem that can be found not only in Malaysia but across ASEAN.

Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Malaysia and challenges of English

The countries in Southeast Asia have diverse histories, have undergone different experiences and consist of many different ethnic groups and languages. Between the end of World War II and 1984, the independence of all of today's nations was achieved and nation-building took place. Indonesia was the first country to declare independence in 1945 and was subsequently engaged in a war against the returning Dutch. The Philippines became independent in 1946 and Burma in 1948. The French were defeated in Indochina in 1954 by the Vietnamese nationalists and after a prolonged struggle Laos and Cambodia were granted independence from France. Brunei was the last country to be released from Britain in 1984. Only Thailand had managed to remain entirely independent and free from colonization (Azirah & Leitner, forthcoming). In 1967 five countries, i.e. Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia decided to form a regional bloc, ASEAN, to counter communist invasions (Kirkpatrick, 2010). They were the founding members but were open to the accession of other countries in the region. Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Burma (later Myanmar) joined in the following decades to form a regional organization with ten member countries. The former incentive is no longer relevant and other political, military, economic, educational, and cultural issues have come to the fore. The geo-political significance of the region has incited other countries like Japan, China or Australia to become associated or affiliated members. Though ASEAN countries are at different stages of nation-building today, they all aspire to form an integrated community by 2015 and to be regional and global players with partners within ASEAN and outside.

Once Southeast Asian countries, with the exception of Thailand, which was never colonized, reached independence, they all developed national language policies that were meant to create coherent national language ecologies. That involves the choice of one or a few official languages, the creation of a hierarchy of languages like in Singapore that allocates status and socio-communicative space to other languages, and the nomination of one or several languages as media of instruction. Policies are dynamic and one can see that priorities have shifted in all countries (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Only Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines have had an Anglophone past, which has turned into or, at least, was perceived as, an asset by the majority of the political and cultural elite. Similar developments have taken place in India and other South Asian countries. But none of the new members have had an Anglophone past to build on. More than that, their economic standing was weak so that they depended on outside help and continue to do so. The absence of a (colonial) English base now necessitates greater investment to create one. National language policies have led to the fact that English is now present in all ASEAN countries. The contexts in which it is used reflect a wide range of differences between countries that need to be addressed by national policies. Thus, it is used for varying purposes along with different genres and registers everywhere, but their frequency and significance differs from country to country. The role of English in the public domain is larger in, say, Malaysia than in Laos. Former Anglophone countries have developed local varieties, while others are generally classified as members of the 'expanding circle' where English is a foreign language. These differences will, as we shall see, have repercussions in educational language policies. As English has become, by consensus, the lingua franca of the whole of ASEAN there is a push towards using a form that is intelligible across all member states. That too will impact on policies and shift the balance towards English as a lingua franca.

National policies were so consensual in the region that no founding member has ever questioned the regional dominance of English. Nor did the new member states

raise any objections when the status of English was officially sanctioned with the signing of the ASEAN Charter in 2009. Article 34 states that “the working language of ASEAN shall be English”. The fact that English had by then become the global language in all relevant aid institutions, the United Nations and the World Bank, and the language of academia undoubtedly strengthened its position in the region and made its acceptance more a matter of fact (Azirah & Leitner, forthcoming). The very relevant and justified debates in most nations about the role of English vis-à-vis other national Southeast Asian languages have not been strong enough or even begun to bear upon regional policies. Nor has any member state ever raised issues about what kind of English was referred to when English was sanctioned.

In a geopolitical region that is integrating and aspires to play a global role, English is increasingly used for multiple functions and as a strong second, foreign, first language or as a lingua franca. In regional and global contexts the role of lingua franca is widely accepted or taken for granted. Without addressing specifically that function, Bolton (2008) asserts that “across Asia, the numbers of people having at least a functional command of the language have grown exponentially over the last four decades, and current changes in the sociolinguistic realities of the region are often so rapid that it is difficult for academic commentators to keep pace” (p. 3). There is a growing baseline for lingua franca English to develop. And while the competition between English and other languages can be seen in all countries, English seems to be the winner and to be seen and promoted as a vehicle of empowerment and participation.

In ASEAN countries “English is [also] now being introduced as a compulsory subject into the primary curriculum in all the 10 countries with the exception of Indonesia”, according to Kirkpatrick (2010, p. 17). In many CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) the number of schools that use English as medium of instruction is fast growing and might well lead to a situation where the function of English in the curriculum is no longer that of a foreign language, but of a “near universal basic skill”, as Graddol (1997, p. 72) has predicted. As the adoption of English seems unavoidable as knowledge and skills are often only accessible and acquired through English, the choice of a local language, as in Malaysia or Indonesia, and its imposition in broad educational contexts is perceived as leading to the danger that the nation lags behind through inability to access knowledge and skills. Many urban middle class parents do send their children to Anglophone countries for the final years of secondary schooling. The fact that local languages are bound to be disadvantaged is widely accepted as the price to pay.

The price to pay for this officially sanctioned adoption of English is a much under-discussed topic. Kirkpatrick (2010) implies a strong criticism when he observes that the expansion of English “adds to the threat for local languages, as English almost always replaces a local language in the primary curriculum” (p. 17). That has not entered mainstream politics though there is, or could be, a real concern that English may not only threaten local languages but, more so, local cultures. That loss will make itself felt in the near future. There are no signs of debates on how a balance between the necessity of English, the respective official language(s) and other languages in the language habitats can be struck. Decisions seem to be taken ad hoc and to the detriment of local languages.

Another neglected topic has to do with English as a lingua franca. Lingua francas are de-cultured entities and are used only for pragmatic functions to enable cross-cultural understanding. In the sciences, international trade, law, relations, or service encounters and small-talk this may indeed be their primary function. But is English as a lingua franca the same worldwide? Its texture and the contents it is used to cater for in

the regional context of ASEAN are the focus of a project currently underway. Data are being collected by teams across East and Southeast Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This resulting corpus will allow researchers to investigate linguistic features of English in Southeast and East Asia and to highlight communicative strategies that are used to ensure comprehension and to negotiate cultural norms. The study also involves an analysis of the actual content and topics discussed in such interactions as they reveal the lexis and parts of the intercultural competence (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

The language needs of higher education

For as long as universities are still at a formative stage as (still) in Cambodia, Myanmar or Laos and mainly cater for students from their own country teaching and research, to the extent that it is done, could be done in the official language, i.e., in Khmer (in Cambodia), Lao (in Laos), Vietnamese (in Vietnam) or Bahasa Indonesia (in Indonesia). But an international or regional ASEAN orientation is soon to emerge and Malaysia's public universities, to look at one example, have been responding fast to the call to internationalize.

This can be seen in teaching, learning, research and services. There are significant indicators such as the increase of student and staff exchanges with universities in North America, Great Britain and other European countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Some universities are members of academic associations like the Asia Pacific Higher Education Association, the Asia-Africa Development Universities Network (AADUN), the Association of Commonwealth Universities, Association of Pacific Rim Universities, Association of Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL), Erasmus Mundus or the ASEAN University Network. Student mobility programmes have brought more international students to the country. Participants are typically non-native speakers of English who currently live in Malaysia and use English as the only available means to communicate with one another. Given the ASEAN objectives outlined in the preceding section to achieve a higher level of integration by 2015 and a more developed status by 2020, that density of inter-ASEAN networks is very important. Some universities like the University of Malaya are engaged in higher education aid programmes with the CLMV countries. That kind of collaboration will develop into research partnerships and mobility programmes among others. This level of internationalization is only possible because most Malaysian universities already have a significant base in English, though it is not present in all disciplines. What is surprising though and echoes some of Kirkpatrick's (2010) observations is that no ASEAN language is involved, that they are not taught much at universities, and that the default language of communication is English.

There are other factors that promote English in higher education institutions. In national higher education systems such as Malaysia's, English is the language of instruction. It may not be the sole such language as a number of universities and disciplines use Bahasa Malaysia, but it is universally the sole medium of instruction in science, medicine and in all programmes in private higher institutions. The role of English is enhanced by the drive to establish more uniform systems and processes in higher education across ASEAN that further the mobility of qualifications, of staff and students. These developments have indeed been successful and have generated opportunities for mobility encouraging students to spend a semester abroad in a university where credit transfer can take place and allowing staff to spend periods of research time and sabbaticals in universities overseas. The importance placed on ranking and league tables in universities in Malaysia and the region has created

additional pressure on local universities to internationalize and to use English so as to meet the conditions required by the ranking bodies in order to climb up the rankings ladder. Related to this is the demand on academics to publish in top journals which almost always use English.

While ‘push’ factors seem to only call for English, there are two additional points that are rarely discussed. One is that these developments require curriculums that promote awareness of diversity in terms of culture, religion, work experience and learning preferences. Different students from different cultural and educational backgrounds will come with different expectations and concerns and bring different perspectives with them. Key competencies would include being able to interact well in heterogeneous groups and in many contexts the language used would be English. Education systems will need to look into how to educate students to have globally relevant competencies, and this would differ from country to country, and job to job. Therefore, there is a need to examine what these competencies are and to see how they could be embedded in the curriculum and education policies.

Second, it is understandable that native or native-like varieties of English are not a priority and that English has lost its original cultural base and become associated with global culture, the *global village*. English is learnt for purely pragmatic reasons (Jenkins, 2007).

Higher education institutions in all ASEAN countries are faced with a dilemma of how to meet this demand for English. It seems comparatively small in countries like Singapore, Malaysia or the Philippines, which have inherited an English language base due to their Anglophone past, but it is noticeable and widely discussed even there. The problem is worse in Expanding Circle countries like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam that have no such base. The need to improve the English language capacity is unavoidable and all countries make significant investments (Azirah, Yee & Pheak, forthcoming) to enable universities to develop a qualified human resource base. Even if those needs were to be described less along economic and pragmatic lines and more to provide a broadly educated segment of society, a good command of English would be necessary.

Before moving on to educational language policies in general and in Malaysia, we will take a brief look at English as a lingua franca and its educational implications in ASEAN countries so as to understand that dilemma better.

English as a regional lingua franca

The ability to use English well is especially important with regard to job and study mobility. A crucial question is to find out if this requires a native-like competence or if English as a lingua franca, which represents a new paradigm for the way English can be seen and taught, is more successful in the regional context. The policy implications of the former target are reasonably clear, and Malaysia’s policies for secondary education are good examples of this (see next section). The implications on teaching and learning of lingua franca English may call for some comment. Kirkpatrick (2012) mentions that language learning objectives, teacher training and the curriculum will be affected. Given the findings reported below, he thinks that English could be presented as an ‘Asian’ lingua franca that is spoken by multilinguals who need English to talk to fellow ASEAN speakers. Their performance in multilingual settings should be measured against the norms of other successful Asian multilinguals. Aspirations of wanting to sound native-like thus no longer exist as strongly as they did in the past. Other scholars have put forward similar views. McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008), for example, has proposed

that “reliance on a native speaker model as the pedagogical target must be set aside” (p. 238). There is the recognition that a more social Asian perspective of second language learning is important.

We will now illustrate some features of English as a lingua franca that have been identified in an ASEAN project to see the differences from a native-like model. The project was initiated and is led by Andy Kirkpatrick (Azirah & Kaur, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Researchers across Southeast Asia are investigating the texture and uses of English as a lingua franca in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Hong Kong and the Philippines. The following illustrations are taken from conversations (transcribed according to the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English or VOICE conventions) between highly educated ASEAN speakers, i.e., teachers and students at a university in Malaysia:

EXAMPLE 1: interchange with S1(Thai), S2 (Indonesian), and S3 (Malaysian); all three are postgraduate students at a university in Malaysia.

S1: what
 S2: come on let's eat
 S1: <LNma>makan makan {eat eat}</LNma>
 S3: so many gossip
 S1: about what
 S3: yes i want
 S2: yeah
 S3: [S1] why you look so different today
 S1: why
 S2: same ()
 S1: argh same
 S2: not same without glasses
 S3: oh without glasses
 S2: ah yeah yeah
 S3: you wear glasses you should wear glasses with me you should wear glasses
 S1: why
 S3: <coughs> hey you going somewhere sunday
 S1: sunday oh yes because [first name1] ask me to go to <spel>k l</spel> sentral
 S3: <spel>k l</spel> sentral to buy what
 S2: central market
 S1: yeah central market she want to buy (.) souvenir fo:r and then [first name2] want to follow too @@ h

EXAMPLE 2: interchange between S1 (Burmese), S2 Malaysian (Malay), and S3, a Sudanese student; two of the three participants are lecturers at a local university and one a businessman.

S1: so the food is sudanese food or malay food? @@
 S2: @@@ er malay
 S1: <1> () </1>
 S2: <1> this one </1> this one this one is sudanese food only fried rice is malay food
 S1: @@@
 S3: malay food with sudanese style
 S1: yah
 S2: who said (so) malay food sudanese style this is
 S3: yah
 S2: malay <2> style also </2>
 S1: <2> @@@ </2> @@
 S2: only i didn't put fish

S1: fish
 S2: <3> you know </3>
 S1: <3> but you like </3> fish?
 S2: you know the erm: anchovies
 S1: yah yah yah
 S2: he didn't like anchovies
 S1: <4> i see </4>
 S2: <4> so i didn't put </4>
 S1: i see
 S3: (i don't) know
 S2: cos now=
 S1: =i want to i want to invite you in my new house maybe i'm i'm waiting the <5> [first name1] </5>
 S2: <5> [first name1] </5>
 S1: [first name1]
 S2: yah yah
 S1: yah then=
 S2: =when [first name1] come?
 S1: er:
 S2: i think
 S1: <6> <LNar> insya allah </LNar> this friday</6>
 S2: <6> another two yah </6>
 S1: his his
 S3: she's going to kampung?
 S1: yah i'm going to kampung
 S2: MM:
 S1: so: would you like to get anything from [place1]?
 S3: she wants to buy () ar
 S1: huh? jade
 S3: she wants to: get <LNma> teh </LNma> ar
 S1: <LNma> teh </LNma> yes
 S2: i want ruby @@@@<7> @@ </7>
 S1: <7> ruby yes </7> ruby
 S2: @@
 S1: not jade huh
 S2: @@@
 S1: yah ruby i can give you but but er: in my in my budget @ <8> @@ </8>
 S2: <8> @@ </8> no need to <9> () lah () to buy for me </9>
 S1: <9> @ @ @ @ </9> @@
 S3: she want to go there=
 S1: =he <10> bought a lot </10>
 S2: <10> yah i </10> i i want to go there
 S1: mhm
 S2: <LNma> insya allah </LNma>
 S3: er she she () the country
 S2: it's nice to see other people's country
 S1: yes

These illustrations show some features that are not used or rare in native-like international forms of English:

1. Tenses: The present simple was the most commonly used tense followed by the past simple; non-marking of the verb for tense in situations where time has already been established by the context.
2. Articles: Articles are used less frequently; non-use or use of definite articles for an indefinite one.
3. Number marking: plurals are often unmarked; plural marking of uncountable nouns and the non-marking of plural countable nouns; pluralisation of countable nouns e.g. I got so many thing, informations.

4. Discourse particles: as in “No *lah*” “It’s possible *mah*”, “Terrible *lah*”
5. Exclamations: “*Aiya* so stupid”
6. Modality: Non-standard modal forms; may not accord with standard functions of the form.
7. Syntax: Non-inversion in *wh*-main clauses, interrogative word order in indirect speech, e.g. “But you can speak a bit *ah*”.
8. Prepositions: A variety of prepositions used in non-standard ways.
9. Turn-taking: Generally very short utterances that may signal unease if speaking longer.
10. Lexis: Loan words are sometimes used especially if there are speakers who share a common first language like a Malaysian talking to an Indonesian e.g. *makan*, *kampung* and *insyaallah*.

The data reveal few disruptions. Although there were a few instances where one or more participants did not understand something they let this pass. Even with a lack of understanding with one or more interlocutors, the conversation progressed successfully. That may be facilitated further as there appear to be commonalities in phonology and syntax between the varieties of English in ASEAN countries. Unsurprisingly, lingua franca English slowly enters more informal and less educated spoken levels. Lingua franca English begins to deepen a family relationship with, for example, Cambodian, Laotian and Malaysian English and speakers may well use a regional lingua franca as a unifying element. That could slow down localization in countries like Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar, which may not be so dynamic with small multilingual populations and may be unlikely to ever develop national norms. But English as a lingua franca in Southeast Asia seems to differ from that in Europe (Seidlhofer, 2010).

While English as a lingua franca may seem a natural and successful vehicle of oral communication among ASEAN speakers, it is clearly inadequate for writing, let alone academic writing and academic discussion. There are thus major challenges to meet the needs of higher education. Southeast Asia seems to be developing away from native or Inner Circle English varieties where oral and written English is becoming more similar. But if informal and semi-formal oral communication develops away from writing, the dilemma mentioned above is really significant: who would be responsible for providing the adequate spoken and written language base? Would it be secondary education or should there be early obligatory qualification courses at university? The former solution would provide more general language experiences; the latter could be more subject-focused. There is no sign that experts and politicians are aware of the clash between secondary and tertiary education. A look at Malaysia’s educational policies may provide a good illustration for a more general trend across ASEAN.

Educational responses to the challenges of English in Malaysia

Malaysia’s politicians seem to be aware of the implications of ASEAN integration on educational policies. They accept English, as we have shown, as a precondition for regional and global mobility and as a necessity in the transformation of societies, if they wish to participate in and benefit from regional integration and global participation. The key to achieving these objectives is assigned to (secondary) education. Unlike Singapore and even Brunei, Malaysia is known for a history of shifting educational language policies. The recent *Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 -2025* (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013) may be seen as an attempt to provide a remedy to past failures. It is the crystallization of past responses to global challenges and formulates

some new ones at the level of secondary education (see also Tham, 2013). It envisages a transformation of secondary education that leads to a considerably higher level and broader base of English proficiency. While Malaysia has abandoned the comparatively small role of English as a medium of instruction in mathematics and science, it now intends to teach English as a strong and compulsory subject until school-leaving age. If implemented, this policy might raise Malaysia's image as one of the few ASEAN countries that have a coherent vision of secondary education and might lead the country to the forefront of a trend noticeable across ASEAN, i.e., to increase the status of English. The spin that the Malaysian Prime Minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak has given to the *Education Blueprint* in his foreword is a bold liberal economic one:

- “Education is a major contributor to our social and economic capital. It inspires creativity and fosters innovation; provides our youth with the necessary skills to be able to compete in the modern labour market; and is a key driver of growth in the economy.... we must ensure that our education system continues to progress in tandem [with other policies]. By doing so, our country will continue to keep pace in an increasingly competitive global economy” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013, pp. 6-7).
- To meet today's challenges “will [2-4] ...require students...to have strong universal values such as integrity, compassion, justice, and altruism, to guide them in making ethical decisions. At the same time, it is important to balance the development of global citizenship with a strong national identity” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013, p. 43).

Prime Minister Najib is not alone in stressing such a position. Though it may not be quite consensual with academics in language policy, he has for long seen the increasing demand for high quality education and for English as the (sole) language of modernization and of access to knowledge. He frames this in an economist policy discourse although he does mention the need for ‘values’ in education. The emphasis on a liberal economist view and on values can be found throughout the *Blueprint*. It is at this point that the *Blueprint* strikes a different note from former education policies that tended to focus on the creation and preservation of a national identity and that tried to put them before the need to make available resources for global demands. As Prime Minister Najib highlights the economist perspective, he draws attention to the fact that globalization places pressure on governments to adopt policies and especially language policies that make citizens proficient enough in English so they are not left behind in the competitive market place.

Educational reforms have been put in place in Malaysia and in other Southeast Asian countries in the last few years in line with global reforms. Rankings such as the Times Higher Education and the QS World University Rankings have influenced the way universities conduct themselves as many international and local students use them as indicators and guidelines for choosing a university. With Malaysia wanting to become an education hub, foreign universities are setting up branch campuses such as Nottingham University, Monash University, Swinburne and others; some also operate in China. In light of competition at the world and the national levels, universities are implementing increasingly stringent key performance indicators to measure and improve academic performance. Many universities market their programs and services around the world and actively network with other universities. Publication in high impact journals has become a priority.

The *Blueprint* is informed by earlier policies on higher education although it does not address the transition to higher education itself:

- Stage 1 (1990)- convergence of (a) plan to reverse the 1980s higher education overseas exodus, and (b) new educational requirements of the First Industrial Masterplan (1990 policy to reverse HE export model)
- Stage 2 (1996)- landmark reforms of 1996 Higher Education Acts (including National Council of HE Act and Private HE Act) especially with regard to private institutions, which now have access to the college sector.
- Stage 3 (2001)- Following 9/11 in 2001, Middle East students have become a strategic focus of the renewed internationalization policy
- Stage 4 (2010)- Higher Education now designated National Key Economic Area (NKEA) within wider New Economic Model (NEM); EduCity and related policies

These steps together strengthened English as a medium of education in higher education, responded to the increasing diversity of student populations, the demands from stakeholders about what kind of education is required in working life, and global competition. Malaysian policies contrast, of course, with claims made by a number of researchers like Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1994) or Canagarajah (1999) who have argued that the expansion of English calls for the need to go against capitalist and imperialist causes and protect human and community rights. But policies in Malaysia and across ASEAN are driven by the need to find solutions to economic development, and ASEAN integration, not by ideological positions or, as mentioned above, the need to retain and give status to local languages. Not even ASEAN languages have been included in higher education institutions.

While these positions are important to the future of Malaysia's school education, one should not overlook some aspects that contrast sharply with the needs of higher education: English is to be taught as a native-like language. The *Blueprint* refers to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and adopts the learning outcome benchmarks. The endpoint in secondary education should be operational proficiency, which is in between B2 and C1. In Europe the endpoint would be C2 and, for some bilingual schools, C1, the native-like competence. It is arguable whether B2 is adequate for higher education or if there is a gap to fill. Like CEFR the *Blueprint* is based on native norms of English, i.e., British or American ones. Programmes to improve in-service-teacher training in English always use native speakers from Britain, the USA and Australia and thus expose learners to a range of native input. Public statements are even more narrow-minded and typically only mention British English speakers. That position is in stark contrast with the needs of higher education.

Conclusion: Language policy in higher education

This paper has surveyed the uses, functions of and demand for English in Malaysia and other ASEAN nations. The practices and needs of higher education institutions were contextualized in the education "chain" from secondary education upwards and into the history of educational policies. Its dependence on secondary school output was highlighted. We will summarize the main findings in four points.

Firstly, the English language needs of higher education are set inside multilingual contexts where English functions as the default or sanctioned language. Speakers must

be successful in such contexts where they interact with speakers within and beyond higher education institutions. Clearly, a native-speaker-like performance is not a priority, though it is not ruled out if adapted to the situational contexts.

Secondly, the nature of English in Malaysia and across Southeast Asia is highly diverse and variable. Quite apart from the deficiencies in competence, speakers may use stable and creative localized forms such as Malaysian, Singaporean and Philippine English. They become role models when they get exported to the other ASEAN countries through regional networks of cooperation, knowledge transfer and training within the region. Even in countries that have no inherited English base there are reasonably stable features that resemble those varieties due to shared typological features or adoption through contact. The tension between these national or regional varieties and the desired command of English, say B2 in Malaysia, needs to be addressed. Should localized forms be ignored in text books when they are part and parcel of what school students bring with them? They will continue to use them as university students and need a practical and a policy response.

Thirdly, if one were to agree with Kirkpatrick (2010) that English as a lingua franca is the best option for higher education institutions one would still need to restrict it to semi-formal spoken contexts and adopt a form of international English for writing, especially academic writing. Add to this the performance gap between school outcomes and university entrance needs, and higher education institutions will have to invest to achieve adequate academic output. Fourthly, whatever target variety is thought to be the most adequate one, even the lingua franca approach cannot disassociate English from culture and pragmatic norms. Teaching and learning require an openness to and acceptance of diversity way beyond immediate comprehension. Diversity has a political angle that needs to be addressed.

About the authors

Azirah Hashim is Dean of the Humanities Research Cluster and a professor in the English Language Department, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. Her research interests include English in Malaysia and in the region, language and the law, and academic and professional discourse.

Gerhard Leitner is a professor of English Philology at the Free University of Berlin. He is the author and editor of more than 25 books on the English language and its variants and has held visiting professorships in Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and China. He is an honorary member of the Australian Academy of Humanities.

References

- Azirah Hashim, & Kaur, J. (2011). *ELF data, ELF corpora: Structural characteristics of ACE*. Paper presented at the 16th World Congress of Applied Linguistics, 23-28 August 2011, Beijing Foreign Studies University, China.
- Azirah Hashim, & Leitner, G. (forthcoming). English as a national, regional and international language: Implications for language policy and planning in Malaysia. In S. Malakolunthu & N. Rengasamy (Eds.), *A nation in the making: Policy discourses in Malaysian education*. Singapore: Routledge.
- Azirah Hashim, Yee, C. L., & Pheak, T. P. (forthcoming). English in Cambodia: Challenges and future directions for providers of higher education. *World Englishes*.
- Bolton, K. (2008). English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the issue of proficiency. *English Today*, 24(2), 3-12.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (1999). *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graddol, D. (1997). *The future of English: A guide to forecasting the popularity of the English language in the 21st century*. London: The British Council.
- Jenkins, J. (2007). *English as a lingua franca: Attitude and identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kirkpatrick, A. (2010). *English as a lingua franca in ASEAN: A multilingual model*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (2012). English in ASEAN: implications for regional multilingualism. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33(4), 331-344.
- McKay, S. L., & Bokhorst-Heng, W. D. (2008). *International English in its sociolinguistic contexts: Towards a socially sensitive EIL pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2013). *Malaysian education blueprint 2013-2025 (preschool to post-secondary education)*. Malaysia: Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.
- Pennycook, A. (1994). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. London: Longman.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2010). Lingua franca English: The European context In A. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of world Englishes* (pp. 355-371). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Tham, S. Y. (Ed.). (2013). *Internationalizing higher education in Malaysia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.