

Language Policies in Asian Countries: A Review

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Abstract: Many Asian countries are multilingual and multi-ethnic and have gained political and economic independence only in the last half of the century or before. Therefore, when formulating language policies, these countries have been confronted with similar issues though they have responded to their specific sociopolitical contexts in different ways. This paper outlines some of the major issues. One is the continued domination of English after gaining political and economic independence resulting from a complex interplay of endogenous as well as exogenous factors. The endogenous factors pertain to the need to balance the interests of social and political groups within the country whereas the exogenous factors pertain to globalization and the use of English as the lingua franca. Another major issue is the asymmetrical power relationship between those who have access to English and those who do not, both internationally and internationally.

Keywords: Language policy, world English's, lingua franca, mother tongue, exogenous, asymmetrical

I. Introduction

Language policy means legislation on and practices pertaining to the use of languages in a society, whereas language-in-education policy means legislation on and practices pertaining to languages or media of instruction and languages of literacy, used in basic education. A language of instruction is a language through which the contents of the curriculum in a given educational system or a part of it are taught and learned, whereas a language of literacy is a language through which literacy is acquired, conveyed, for example, through printed materials and oral instruction.

The term first language or L1 refers to a language a person speaks as a mother tongue, vernacular, native language, or home language. It should be noted that bi- or multilingual people may consider several languages, their mother tongues or first languages. The mother tongue is seen here as a language that a speaker (a) has learnt first; (b) identifies with; (c) knows best; (d) uses most (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; UNESCO, 2003); or (e) speaks and understands competently enough to learn academic content at the appropriate age level (Benson & Kosonen, 2009).

The distinction of language and dialect (also called non-standard variety of a language) is treated in this publication from the linguistic point of view, which emphasizes intelligibility. Thus, only when people speaking different speech varieties understand each other sufficiently and can

communicate without difficulty can speak dialects of the same language. If intelligibility between speakers of different speech varieties is insufficient, they speak different languages.

Several of the original papers submitted to SEAMEO used terminology such as “hill tribes” or “indigenous people.” As these terms are contested and understood differently in different countries – and some countries and people avoid using them altogether.. When the term indigenous is used, it generally refers to something that originates from the place in question rather than something that has recently come from outside (see also the definition for a local language). In reference to the people who are the focus of this publication, the use of the term ethnolinguistic minority to refer to a group of people who: a) share a culture and/or ethnicity and/or language that distinguishes them from other groups of people. b) are either fewer in terms of number or less prestigious in terms of power than the predominant groups in the state. It should be noted, however, that there are ethnolinguistic groups in some Southeast Asian countries who are not minorities, even though their languages do not have official status and are not used as the main languages of instruction in education. Due to this fact, the term non-dominant languages (NDLs) – rather than the more ambiguous “minority language” or “indigenous language” – is generally used in this book to refer to languages or language varieties that are not considered the most prominent in terms of number, prestige, or official use by the government and/or the education system. A local language (also called vernacular or indigenous language by some) is considered in as a language spoken in a fairly restricted geographical area, and usually not learned as a second language by people outside the immediate language community. A local language often has at least some of the following characteristics: it is a language (a) without a written form; (b) whose development is not yet complete; and/or (c) that is not considered suitable for use in education, due to its low status or small number of speakers. In minority settings, the local language is usually the first language of the given ethnolinguistic minority group.

A language of wider communication (LWC) is a language that speakers of different local languages use to communicate with each other. LWC is also called a lingua franca or trade language. At the national level, the LWC is usually the national or official language. In the multilingual situations of Southeast Asia, LWCs are often major regional languages that various ethnolinguistic groups use in communication with each other.

A second language (L2) is a language that is not the mother tongue of a person, but one that the speaker is required to study or use. It may be a foreign language or a language of wider communication. A second language may be a language that is not spoken in the immediate environment of the learner, or it may be one widely spoken outside the home. For ethnolinguistic minorities, the second language usually is the national or the official language, employed in contexts such as schools, interaction with government agencies, or communication with other language groups. A national language is “a language that is considered to be the chief language of a nation state” (Crystal, 1999; 227), whereas an official language is a language that is “used in such public domains as the law courts, government, and broadcasting. In many countries, there is no difference between the national and official language.” (ibid.)



Fig 1: Language-in-education policy

Language development is a part of language planning, or what Spolsky (2004) calls language management. Language planning, in its simplest form, can be divided into three parts: status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning (Cooper, 1989). Status planning refers to language policy, such as decisions about which languages are used for official and educational purposes. Corpus planning means, among other things, the development of orthographies, i.e. writing systems and standardization of language use. In this article, language development, for local languages, refers mainly to corpus planning. Acquisition planning has to do with methods used to help people learn languages. Script is “the graphic form of the units of a writing system (e.g. the Roman vs. the Cyrillic alphabet).” (Crystal, 1999: 299) Roman script is used for Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Malaysia, and Filipino, Thai script is used for Thai, and Lao script for Lao. Each of these scripts can be adapted to create orthographies for minority languages. A writing system is a “system of visual marks on a surface” to record a spoken language (ibid.: 368). Orthography is “a standardised system for writing a particular language. The notion includes a prescribed system of spelling and punctuation.” (ibid.: 244) The alphabet of a language is a set of symbols, usually letters, which represent the sounds of the language. Bilingual/multilingual education (MLE) means the use of more than one language for instruction and attaining literacy, and biliteracy refers to the use of more than one language for reading and writing. Mother tongue-/ L1-based or first language first MLE means a system of multilingual education, which begins with or is based on the learners’ first language or mother tongue. This term is used to distinguish first language-based MLE from education that employs several languages, but does not include the learners’ first languages.

Submersion education is the opposite of using the learners’ mother tongue in education, and it refers to deployment of a language of instruction that the learner does not speak or understand. Submersion education commonly takes place when minority children with limited proficiency in the majority language (usually the official/national language) are put into majority language classrooms without any provision for accommodating or alleviating the learners’ disadvantages caused by not knowing the language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: 582-587).

Oral use of a language refers to the employment of an auxiliary language to enable learners to understand the contents of the curriculum and its textbooks. It is important to distinguish this concept from bi- and multilingual education, as in some countries of the region the oral use of NDLs in education is thought to be multilingual education. Mother tongue as a ‘bridge’ language of instruction refers to situations in which an educational programme is organized so that mother tongue

speakers of non-dominant languages can build a culturally and linguistically appropriate educational foundation in their home language first, and subsequently learn additional languages. They thereby gain the potential to use all their languages for life-long learning. The use of ethnolinguistic minorities' mother tongues implicitly refers to multilingualism, multilingual education, and multiliteracy in at least two languages, including the first language of the learner. The authors acknowledge that education and literacy in a small minority language alone is inadequate in the world today. People speaking non-dominant languages should also be provided opportunities, if they so wish, to learn at least the national language of a given country.

II. Background Works

Thanks to this, Asian contexts emerge as resourceful places of case studies on language policies with reference to ELF and WE perspectives. This special number is thus put together, including three types of contributions.

The first category includes three articles that address language policy from an ELF perspective. Among them, two articles (Kirkpatrick, Baker and Jarunthawatchai) focus on English as a subject matter of education, and one article (Wang) addresses English as a medium of instruction in higher education. Despite different data in different contexts, the discussion of ELF in relation to language policy converges in these three articles. In the first place, Andy Kirkpatrick approaches 'Language education policy among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'. He provides an overview of the development of English in ASEAN and compares language policies in the ASEAN with those in the EU. In his view, the development of English in the ASEAN is at the expense of other languages, while multilingualism is well respected in the EU. To remedy the problem and to promote multilingualism in ASEAN contexts, he proposes to reflect the role of ELF in language education by adopting a lingua franca approach that challenges an exclusive reference to native English norms. He further concretizes his proposal by drawing on Myanmar as an example and suggests how to integrate ELF into language education policy in Myanmar.

The ELF-informed investigation of language policy in ASEAN extends to Thailand as a focal point in Will Baker and Wisut Jarunthawatchai's article 'English language policy in Thailand'. In comparison with Kirkpatrick's views of endangered multilingualism in ASEAN, their overview of the language landscape in Thailand points to their argument that the nation is witnessing an increasing awareness of multilingualism, in contrast with the predominant monolingual and monocultural ideologies underpinning education policy. With a focus on language management in Spolsky's (2012) framework of language policy, they see an increasing emphasis on English language education in policy that relates to an ideology about English as key to development and globalization. As they further point out, however, the policy does not lead to optimism among the Thai populace, given the perceived low achievement in English education. Adopting an ELF perspective, the two authors suggest that current evaluation of English proficiency is based on Anglo-centred models of English and thus inappropriate. This view converges with Kirkpatrick's argument in the latter's suggestion to language education policy in Myanmar. Baker and Jarunthawatchai conclude by discussing negative effects on education and social equality of the modeling on native speakers' English. This links their argument with a concern for language ideological issues in the Thai context.

A third case of studying the implication of ELF for Asian language policies is sourced from China. In her article on 'Language policy in Chinese higher education: A focus on international students in China', Ying Wang investigates the medium of instruction in higher education provided to international students by Chinese universities. She integrates Spolsky's (2012) language policy model with Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) multiple approach to form her analytical framework. Her study reveals a policy vacuum with regard to English as a medium of instruction in Chinese higher education oriented towards international students, whereas the signification of ELF is found to be readily accepted by international classroom participants. In the meantime, the data provide insights into a dilemma between language proficiency and disciplinary expertise, as well as conflicting and questionable language ideologies, among teachers as agents in the process of internationalizing Chinese higher education. Bringing the findings together, Wang takes issue with the language policy vacuum and discusses its negative effects on both international education practice and multilingualism in China against the background of global mobility. She concludes the article by suggesting possible solutions to the issues as reflected in her study. Joining the first two articles (i.e. Kirkpatrick, Baker and Jarunthawatchai), Wang argues for the need to integrate ELF in language policy, which is applicable to China's higher education, and further discusses the integration in theoretical and practical dimensions.

The second category of articles engages research into language policy from a WE perspective, including two articles that challenge Anglophone orientation in postcolonial contexts. Here the ownership of English is reclaimed and local people to question the relevance of Anglophone English for local communities adapt the use of English. One contribution is Stephen Evans's article 'Language policy in Hong Kong education: A historical overview'. Evans provides a sociolinguistic and historical overview of the development of language policy in Hong Kong education, with the focus on the medium of instruction. He considers sociolinguistic, political and historical impacts on the development of medium of education in Hong Kong in three phrases whereby English was for elite, for the masses, and in competition with Chinese. Based on the examination, Evans argues that the demarcation between Outer Circle and Expanding Circle as mapped in Kachru's three-circle model of the spread of English is necessary in understanding EMI-related policy and practice. Despite the difference, however, Evans draws on the experience of EMI in Hong Kong to point to potentially negative impacts on European education of pursuing Anglophone-oriented EMI in European universities.

Another WE-relevant contribution is Yingying Tan's article on 'Singlish: An illegitimate conception in Singapore's language policies?'. Tan contextualizes her study in vigorous movements in Singapore that aim to eliminate Singlish to promote national image and economic development, which in her view, however, contradicts with the very representation of Singaporean identities and linguistic repertoires. She engages the dilemma between Singlish as a shared medium of communication among Singaporean populace and Singlish as an illegitimate form in national language policy. By adopting Mufwene's (2001) theory of language ecology, she examines the development of Singlish as respondent to the socio-political environment that Singapore features as a multilingual nation with postcolonial history. With a focus on Singlish users' language practice, she criticizes the assumption that Singlish is an indicator of linguistic poverty and invites the question as to whether Singlish relates to empowerment or disempowerment. In her conclusion, she argues that the movements against

Singlish reflect a colonial mindset, leading to a question of the ownership of language in relation to national identity.

III. Policies And Practices In Different Countries

The following discussion proposes to elaborate on and interpret each national situation.

Brunei Darussalam: Brunei Darussalam is the smallest Southeast Asian nation in terms of population. Even so, like other SEAMEO countries, Brunei is ethnically and linguistically diverse. The majority of the population belongs to various Malay groups, speaking several Malay languages. There are also several ethnolinguistic minorities with their own languages. These include a number of languages indigenous to the area as well as non-indigenous languages, such as varieties of Chinese, and languages of more recent migrants. It is estimated that seventeen languages are spoken in Brunei, though this figure does not include all the languages of temporary migrant labourers (Ethnologue, 2005; Jernudd, 1999; Jones, 2008; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003; Kosonen, 2005; Leclerc, 2009; Martin, 1999, 2008; Tucker, 1998; UNESCO, 2007a).

Cambodia: In Cambodia, where twenty-two languages are spoken, the Khmer are without a doubt the largest ethnolinguistic group, comprising approximately 90 percent of the population. This makes Cambodia one of the linguistically least diverse nations in Asia. The populations of most ethnolinguistic minorities are small, apart from the Cham, Chinese, and Vietnamese, whose populations are in the hundreds of thousands (Ethnologue, 2005; Kosonen, 2005, 2007; Leclerc, 2009; Neou Sun, 2008). The Constitution of 1993 establishes Khmer as the official language. The Khmer script also has official status. Until the late 1990s, the medium of instruction at all levels of education was in Khmer, though some schools had also been teaching Chinese and Vietnamese as subjects of study (Leclerc, 2009).

Indonesia: Indonesia, with more than 740 languages, is linguistically the most diverse country in all of Asia. It is second globally after Papua New Guinea, where some 850 languages are spoken. The official and national language – according to the 1945 Constitution – is Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia). Indonesian is also the language of instruction at all levels of education. Only an estimated 15 percent of the population can speak Indonesian as their mother tongue, however. Regional languages of wider communication as well as local non-dominant languages are widely used, though mostly orally, around the country. A large proportion of Indonesians speak Indonesian as a second language with varying levels of proficiency.

IV. Conclusion

Taken together, the six contributions suggest an alternative way of considering English in relation to multilingualism. By challenging the taken-for-granted wisdom that English refers to Anglophone English tied to Anglophone origins of English, the contributors deliver a shared message in their studies that the popularity of English does not conflict with multilingualism but works with multilingualism. The Asian experiences provide examples as to how to negotiate between the national need for economic development associated with English and the respect for sociolinguistic diversity overlapping with multilingualism.

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