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Success or failure of primary second/foreign language programmes in Asia: what do the data tell us?

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Success or failure of primary second/foreign language programmes in Asia: what do the data tell us?

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Primary school second/foreign language (SL/FL) programmes in Asia, as well as in other parts of the world, are becoming more common, with many targeting English as the SL or FL. The pressures for such English language programmes come from top-down notions that in a globalised world English is required for societies to be competitive, especially with Asian neighbours, and bottom-up pressures from parents who see English as the key to educational success for their children. In many polities, these forces have resulted in support for policies that introduce early primary school English teaching curricula for all students and have led to parents spending large sums of money on private tutoring or out-of-school tuition. This study reviews the results of nine language planning studies from the Asian region that set out to examine questions such as ‘Is this trend towards early primary SL or FL education (mainly English) realistic or is it unattainable and a waste of resources? Do children really benefit from these programmes? What needs to be done to foster learners’ success?’ These issues are viewed from a language planning and policy perspective through an examination of the language-in-education policy types required for the development of successful programmes. The policies of a number of Asian countries are used as case studies to illustrate this issue.

Keywords: language planning; primary school; English as a foreign language; language teaching; Asia

Introduction

Kaplan, Baldauf and Kamwangamalu (2011) have suggested 12 reasons for educational language plans sometimes failing. These include:

- (1) The time dedicated to language learning is inadequate.
- (2) Indigenous teacher training is not appropriate or effective.
- (3) Native speakers cannot fill the proficiency and availability gap.
- (4) Educational materials may not be sufficient or appropriate.
- (5) Methodology may not be appropriate to desired outcomes.

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- (6) Resources may not be adequate for student population needs.
- (7) Continuity of commitment may be problematic.
- (8) Language norms may be a problem.
- (9) International assistance programmes may not be useful.
- (10) Primary school children may not be prepared for early language learning.
- (11) Instruction may not actually meet community and/or national objectives.
- (12) Language endangerment may increase.

In addition, having different language policies for different types of schools (e.g. public and private) also can lead to the government policy failure (Phyak, 2011). Although there have been some attempts made to examine more general language planning issues and their successes and failures in individual polities in Asia (Baldauf & Kaplan, 2006; Fishman & Garcia, 2011, Chapters 13–22; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003, 2008), and a number of sources are available that look at English language teaching in Southeast and East Asia (Choi & Spolsky, 2007; Ho & Wong, 2003; Lee & Azman, 2004; McCloskey, Orr, & Dolitsky, 2006), there is a lack of cross-national analysis available that looks systematically at the issue of planning for English or other second languages (SLs) or foreign languages (FLs) for primary schools in Asia (but for Europe, see Extra & Gorter, 2008; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007, for a more general discussion of language policy and planning (LPP) and education in Asian). The authors of the papers in this volume fill this gap by providing some specific examples of both successful and more problematic LPP outcomes. They also examine what has influenced that policy and planning in relation to introducing languages (i.e. primarily English) as an FL/SL in primary schools in the Asia Pacific region. In this paper, we summarise these issues and draw some conclusions.

Discussion: the early introduction of English

Having examined some instances of the successes, problems and challenges of language planning for primary schools in the nine Asia Pacific polities covered in this volume, let us now step back to see if there seem to be generalisations that can be made about language planning success and failure with regard to primary school SL/FL (i.e. predominantly English) teaching in East and Southeast Asian polities and, in particular, whether there are more general implications that can be drawn. Nearly a decade ago, Nunan's (2003, p. 594) survey of polities indicated that English was being introduced at an early age, indicating a change in access policy. This trend has intensified under the pressure of economic competition. This is so despite the fact that such teaching requires massive commitments of funds (i.e. resourcing policy), special early childhood teacher training, teachers with excellent language skills (i.e. personnel policy), and books and materials (i.e. curriculum, materials and methods policy). As with much language planning, the decisions taken by governments appear to be predominantly political (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2007) and against the little FL – as opposed to SL – research evidence available (Múnoz, 2006). Support for such teaching also appears to be inadequate. Unless such programmes are properly resourced, one might predict massive failures and the unfortunate waste of resources. A brief overview of the language policies, language-in-education policy imperatives and the reasons for implementing them and language evaluation strategies are summarised in Table 1. In the following sections, drawing on the 12 reasons for language-in-education plans failing, the findings from the studies in this volume are summarised under the six key policy headings found in Kaplan and Baldauf (2003) before some of the contextual factors involved are examined.

Table 1. Policy and reasons for the introduction of primary SLs/English in Southeast and East Asian polities?

Polity	Access policy ^a	Frequency of instruction	Impact of L2s/English as a global language; community policy	Evaluation policy
Bangladesh	Grade 1, age 6	Five times a week, 3 h, on average, a week	Introduced in the earliest grade in 1992 Setting communicative competence as the goal of instruction for national participation in the global economy Enhancing the standards of English in the country School instruction has not helped much in reaching these goals and factors outside school influence learning achievement and outcomes	Formative assessment to evaluate students' performance is suggested in various forms for students to choose
China, PRC	Grade 3, ages 8–9	Four times a week, with a minimum of 80 min	Age for compulsory English lowered from 11 to 9 in September 2001 English teaching emerging as a private business	
Japan	Grades 5 and 6	One 45 min period per week	Implemented in 2011 in the form of 'Foreign Language Activities' Part of the plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities' to remain competitive in the international market	

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Polity	Access policy ^a	Frequency of instruction	Impact of L2s/English as a global language; community policy	Evaluation policy
Malaysia	Grade 1, age 7	National schools: 300 min/week; National-type schools (vernacular):150 min/week	English is an SL in Malaysia English is a compulsory subject in primary school curriculum Concern with the decline in educational standards and economic competitive advantage Pro-PPSMI parent groups who lobby for maintaining the PPSMI policy The trend that parents send their children to expensive private schools for better exposure to English-linguistic environment Fear of impact on national language	<i>The PPSMI</i> was implemented in 2003 and has shown potential of undesirable outcomes – in terms of students' content and language learning and the urban–rural divide – which led to the reversal of the PPSMI policy in stages beginning in 2011 <i>The MBMMBI Policy replaces the PPSMI policy and began its implementation at Grade 1(Year1) in 2011. The MBMMBI</i> positions the higher status of Bahasa Malaysia as the language of knowledge, which was missing in the PPSMI policy, while English is empowered, evidently in the increase of teaching time and the reintroduction of native English-speaking teachers in the educational system

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Nepal	Grade 1, age 6	Primary level (Grades 1–5): 150 periods in one academic year	A large number of public schools which are managed by local communities are shifting from Nepali to English medium of instruction	Grades 1–3: Continuous assessment: managed by schools and teachers in which everyday records of students' progress (portfolio) in language skills, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are kept
		Lower secondary (Grades 6–8): 175 periods in one academic year	Teaching of and in first language policy at primary level is not effective due to early introduction of English both as a subject and as the medium of instruction	Grades 4–5: formal test (half-yearly and annual examinations managed by schools) involves (a) simple, familiar conversation, (b) response to aural stimulus and reading/writing test which tests the pupils' ability to read and understand simple sentences and write neatly and correctly
		Secondary (Grades 9–10): 150 periods in one academic year (Note: Duration of period is 45 min)	Parents are sending their children to private schools (which are virtually English medium) by spending a huge amount of money as they assume that learning English is synonymous with getting quality education Two language policies: English medium (private schools) and Nepali or other local language medium (public schools)	Grades 6–7: terminal (summative) examination (60%) and continuous assessment system (40%) Grade 8: district-level examination (managed by District Education Office), 25% marks for listening and speaking skills and 75% marks for reading and writing skills

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Polity	Access policy ^a	Frequency of instruction	Impact of L2s/English as a global language; community policy	Evaluation policy
Singapore	Grade 1, age 7	As an L1 for Grade 1 through tertiary (except for mother tongue classes)	<p>Due to lack of competent, proficient and trained teachers, students (in public schools) still find English as the most difficult subject, leading to high failure rate in the national-level School Leaving Certificate Examination though they start learning from Grade 1</p> <p>English is the first language of all Singaporeans</p> <p>It is compulsory for all Singaporeans to learn to speak and write in English proficiently</p> <p>It is the medium of instruction used in all subjects in government schools, except for mother tongue and third language classes</p>	<p>Major national examinations to serve as the benchmark:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Primary School Leaving Examination taken at the end of primary school education (12 years old). The subjects English, Mathematics and Science are tested in English, except for mother tongue languages 2. The General Certificate of Education (GCE) O-Level taken at the end of secondary school education (16 or 17 years old) and GCE A-Level taken at the end of junior college education (18 or 19 years old) by students who are enrolled in the government or government-aided schools <p>Multiple assessments are stipulated in primary EFL education curriculum</p>
Taiwan	Grade 3, ages 9–10	Two 40 min periods a week	EFL education lowered from secondary school level (Grade 7) to Grade 5 in 2001 and to Grade 3 in 2005	

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Timor-Leste	<p>Grades 1–9 Portuguese as MOI. Tetum as an auxiliary teaching language</p> <p>Grade 7–9 English is introduced or Year 5 where human resources and materials allow. (RCDEB, 2010, p. 15).</p>	<p>First and second cycles (Grades 1 through 6):</p> <p>Tetum: Grades 1–2: Five 50 min periods a week. Grade 3: Four 50 min periods a week. Grades 4–6: Three 50 min periods a week</p> <p>Portuguese: Grades 1–2: Three 50 min periods a week. Grade 3: Four 50 min periods a week. Grades 4–6: Five 50 min period a week.</p> <p>English: Grades 5–6: Two 50 min periods a week (optional, depending on the school's capacity to teach English.</p> <p>Third cycle (Grades 7–9):</p>	<p>Inconsistency in starting grade levels of EFL education among local government districts</p> <p>Parents put an overemphasis on children's English learning</p> <p>Private language institutions have mushroomed nationwide</p> <p>Huge financial investment in primary EFL education</p> <p>Marginalised the local language policy and its use and learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widespread public interest in learning English. • Growing numbers of urban East Timorese have been exposed to English and have gained at least some proficiency in English. • The proposed multilingual education policy recommends that English should be introduced in Grade 7 to allow for longer exposure to the national and co-official languages. 	<p>However, most of the assessments are conducted in the form of written tests</p> <p>Some local governments require fifth-grade students to take a cross-district proficiency test</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summative assessment in all subjects at the end of each semester from Grade 1. • Standardised tests in Grades 4 and 6. • National exams at the end of Grade 9. All subjects are currently examined in Portuguese except for Tetum and English.
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Table 1. Continued.

Polity	Access policy ^a	Frequency of instruction	Impact of L2s/English as a global language; community policy	Evaluation policy
Vietnam	Grade 3, ages 8–9 (pilot)	Tetum: Three 45 min periods a week. Portuguese: Five 45 min periods a week. English: Three 45 min periods a week.		
		Grades 3–5: 140 periods per year	The introduction of English at the primary school level has become increasingly prominent, especially in big cities since the 1990s	Evaluation focuses on students' communicative competence in language use
		Grades 6–9: 105 periods for each Grade (three periods/week)	Compulsory English lowered from secondary school level (Grade 6) to Grade 3 in 2010 (pilot English curriculum). English was taught as an elective subject long ago	Desire for primary children to reach Level A1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
		Grades 10–12: 105 periods for each grade (three periods/week)	English is taught from Grade 1 in some private primary schools. There has been a great demand for quality primary English education	Inconsistency between the objectives and teaching practice Lack of qualified teachers Lack of resources

Notes: Additional contributors to this table were Nor Liza Ali (Malaysia) and Chen Ai-Hua (Taiwan). No data were provided for Hong Kong. Abbreviations: *PPSMI policy – Dasar Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris*, The use of English in the teaching of science and mathematics policy.

^aGrade level and age at which English/SL/FLs are introduced as a compulsory subject.

Access policy

Governments have increasingly been providing access to English through primary programmes in English that now start in Grade 3 or even Grade 1. The important question as to whether children are prepared for early language learning in an FL before they have developed literacy skills in their own language is rarely considered, although in Singapore, where the early teaching of English is most advanced, policy puts an emphasis on pre-school activities in English. However, this input still may not be sufficient to prepare students who do not speak English at home to start English as a medium of instruction in school in Grade 1 (Chua, 2011). While this access is often initially couched in terms of ability to offer programmes, or provided in cities where resources were available, early access has become more widespread. This expansion has led to inequalities in both access and quality of access within most polities (see the discussion in Chen, 2011; Hamid & Baldauf, 2011; Li, 2011; Nguyen, 2011; Phyak, 2011).

Personnel policy

Primary teaching requires a different type of training for all teachers, including language teachers. The rapid expansion of primary programmes has meant that there are not enough teachers, not to mention appropriately trained teachers. For instance, in Vietnam, most of the primary English teachers were not formally trained to teach English at the primary level (Nguyen, 2011). Even where there are enough teachers, such as in Bangladesh or Nepal, many are not adequately trained nor do they have adequate English language skills (Hamid, 2010; Phyak, 2011). Even in well-resourced situations such as in Singapore, teacher training could be more effective (Chua, 2011). This shortage has led to the use of part-time (often unqualified) locals (Chen, 2011; Li, 2010, 2011) or the importation of expensive native speakers (some of whom also may not be well trained) (Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2011; Chen, 2011; Hashimoto, 2011). This deficiency points to an urgent need for programmes that develop the specialists required, through both pre-service or in-service training. Such training needs to go beyond short-term language assistance programmes, such as those being provided in Bangladesh (Hamid, 2010), to develop local capacity to train teachers. Provision also must be made for teachers to counter drift away from full control of the target language through periodic opportunities to refresh language skills (Nguyen, 2011), perhaps through residence in areas where the target language is the dominant language.

Curriculum, methods and materials policy

One commonality found across the polities in the region is that they all have put in place often quite impressive curriculum policies with a communicative focus. However, this is in some ways the easy part – setting aspirations through policy. However, as these polity case studies show, implementation which involves moving to a more communicative methodology and requires appropriate materials, especially textbooks, as well as a variety of other supporting facilities, is much more difficult both to follow and to finance. For example, in both Taiwan (Chen, 2011) and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011), the textbooks in use are controversial, and the appropriateness of some is open to question.

The reality that the target language is not widely spoken in the community has an impact on adopting a communicative focus, as the target language remains entirely a school artefact, never employed by learners beyond the classroom and beyond the narrow range of topics available to the classroom. This situation found in many areas outside the major

urban areas in Asia constitutes a problem that may make using the communicative approach much more difficult, if not impractical (e.g. in Bangladesh – Hamid & Baldauf, 2008).

Resourcing policy

Funding for language programmes is inherently expensive, and for some countries in Asia, this creates major problems. In Bangladesh (Hamid, 2010) and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011), for example, funding for normal programmes, the training of teachers and money for textbooks are all inadequate. There is little or no funding that can be found for languages that consume a lot of resources. For this reason, in some countries such as Bangladesh, much development funding for English language teaching relies on funding from interested foreign donors (Hamid, 2010). Under such circumstances, FL teaching is unlikely to increase significantly, unless there are other social or economic reasons for this to occur. Foreign donors may misconceive the limitations in the target policy and the differences between sociocultural assumptions (e.g. about the role of women, the role of schools and the role of learning) in the donor community and in the recipient community.

In most other polities in the region, the private sector plays an important role in primary-level English study. As Nguyen (2011) found in her study of two primary schools in Vietnam, the privately funded school was able to attract better teachers and provide better conditions because it was better resourced. In Taiwan, many parents indicated that they were sending their children for extra tuition (Chen, 2011), while even in Singapore where funding for education is substantial, most parents still send their children to after-hours tuition, with English and mathematics being the subjects most frequently invested in (Chua, 2011). Some of these programmes are also sponsored by foreign entities such as the British Council. However, as Chen (2011) and Hamid (2010; also see Hamid & Baldauf, 2011) pointed out, in Taiwan and Bangladesh, this disparity between those who can afford private tuition and those who cannot is creating social divisions in society.

Community policy: parent-driven demand for English

While globalisation and comparisons with proficiency in other Asian polities have driven polities to develop early primary school English language programmes, parents are also pressuring governments to provide primary English programmes (Chen, 2011) and are investing heavily in English language education through after-school classes and tutoring – see the previous section (also see Hamid, Sussex & Khan, 2009). Many parents clearly believe that their families' economic future depends on English proficiency. This is creating inequality of opportunity in many societies and preserving socio-economic differences within the learner community.

Evaluation policy

One of the major problems is that evaluation policy – at least as it is implemented – has not caught up with curriculum policy and is often contradictory to it. While curriculum policy at the primary level tends to stress communicative competence, most of the high-stakes examinations are still based on grammar, vocabulary and multiple-choice rote learning. These case studies show that there is some awareness of this issue. Tests with a more communicative focus are being developed in a number of polities (e.g. South Korea, China, Nepal and Taiwan), but there is still a problem of bringing evaluation policy and language teaching policy into alignment.

Contextual factors

The studies in this volume raise a number of contextual factors that need to be considered as they relate to teaching English or other SLs at primary school. These include changes to the language ecology, indigenisation of English, objections and resistance to English, and issues of language, identity and language rights. Communities need to consider what impact strong languages such as Chinese, English or Portuguese might have on majority languages in some polities (Kristinsson & Hilmarsson-Dunn, 2010 – Icelandic), minority languages, immigrant languages or indigenous languages and whether the loss of registers by these languages justifies the wide use of a strong language of wider communication.

English and changes to the language ecology

As English has become increasingly important in Asian education and societies, it has had an impact on other languages. For example, in Singapore, use of English as a mother tongue in Singaporean households has increased, and this has required a change in the way Mandarin (and Tamil) is taught in schools, with Mandarin as an SL programmes being implemented (Chua, 2011; Zhao, Liu & Hong, 2007). Its increasing presence in the curriculum more generally may be reducing the space for other languages to be taught, including minority languages. This is clearly occurring in Taiwan, where the curricular reforms which introduced English and minority languages into the curriculum at about the same time have marginalised minority language teaching (Chen, 2011; Tsao, 2008), and in Nepal, where the popularity of English is undermining reforms to teach minority languages (Phyak, 2011). In Hong Kong, the changes in policy beginning with the handover from British colonial rule to incorporation in the People's Republic of China as a Special Administrative Region have also meant changes that effect minorities, such as the South Asians (Gao, 2011). Given that the curriculum is not infinitely expansive, and that time is an important factor in teaching a language (Kaplan et al., 2011), the addition of English to the curriculum is bound to force other things out.

As a new nation with a fresh opportunity to develop language policy, Timor-Leste provides an interesting contrast to other polities discussed in this volume, as under the proposed new multilingual approach, Portuguese and Tetum would be introduced in pre-primary school and FLs such as English and Indonesian would only appear in Grade 7 (RCDEB, 2010; Taylor-Leech, 2011). It will be interesting to see whether this approach is successful more generally, but also in terms of keeping English out of primary school.

Indigenisation of English

A widespread phenomenon in Asia is the development of a cline of varieties of English ranging from 'standard' English at one end to substrate varieties at the other end. These varieties represent both indigenisation and identity markers; for example, Singlish incorporates Hokkien and Malay words and usage (see <http://www.talkingcock.com>) and is widely used by young people in Singapore (Chua, 2011). Other recognised varieties in the literature include Manglish (see the impact of this at the university level in Ali et al., 2011), Chinglish (Qiang & Wolff, 2003) and Japlish/Japalish (Yamagouchi, 2002). Such varieties already exist in Korea, Vietnam and South Asia. Similar varieties have also been reported elsewhere in the world, for example, Sheng in Kenya, which derives from the mixing of Swahili and English (Parkin, 1974), and CamFranglais (also Franglais) in Cameroon, which refers to a dialect created by mixing English and French (and some local languages). The prevalence

of these indigenised Englishes in Asia is illustrated in the following anecdote provided by Kaplan:

At an academic cocktail party in Tokyo some dozen years ago, I met a Japanese economics professional who was recently retired from a career in Japanese Government service. We spoke together (not without some difficulty) for quite some time, largely in Japlish – his developed through his exposure to global English, mine through my exposure to Japanese academic colleagues who were mildly tolerant of my ignorance. In sum, he argued that all efforts to teach ‘good’ English to Japanese should be abandoned; rather, Japlish should be taught because Japanese would speak it to non-Japanese and would encounter it from non-Japanese, regardless of the circumstances and the linguistic backgrounds of the interlocutors (our conversation being an example). In hindsight, he was arguing, probably rightly, for the kind of plurilingualism described by Canagarajah (2009). As my Japanese interlocutor’s behaviour shows, the ‘correction’ (in language management theory terms) was for both of us to use Japlish, despite the fact that in this situation, hosted by the Japanese faculty of a Japanese university, a Japanese speaker, a government official, an elder, surrendered his first language and control of the discourse to me, an English speaker, a foreigner, a mere academic and a chronological junior. (Kaplan, 2011, p. 92).

Objections and resistance

Examples of resistance to the spread of English or other FLs (Canagarajah, 1999) are perhaps more difficult to cite, although this is clearly occurring in some sectors and may be causing increased social stratification as in Bangladesh or Nepal or may be causing the felt need to protect the national language, as in Japan (Hashimoto, 2011). However, we may note that despite the fact that English is a required subject in many polities (for graduation and for professional qualifications), many students seem demotivated to learn it. The question as to whether this is the result of resistance and/or problems related to instruction may be posed (Tran & Baldauf, 2007).

Identity and linguistic rights

The increased presence of English in the curriculum normally means that something else must go – curricula and schools only have a fixed amount of time. Most new introductions – except for the previously instituted programmes such as teaching mathematics and science in English in Malaysia from Form 1 (Ali et al., 2011) – do not make use of bilingual principles. Typically, such additions put pressures on third languages (e.g. South Asian languages in Hong Kong, Gao, 2011, or indigenous languages in Taiwan, Chen, 2011), whether they are minority languages or SLs/FLs. Although the issue of linguistic rights for indigenous communities is being addressed by language policies in different polities such as Nepal (Phyak, 2011) or Taiwan (Chen, 2011), the popularity of English language education continues to increase due to the perceived relationship between English as a language of the educated and material prosperity and social standing. In this sense, parents’ and children’s desire to acquire wider social identities through English seems to be more powerful as social capital than the right to get an education in one’s minority language for the expansion of English at the primary level in Asian countries.

Conclusions

In much of Asia, community-based multilingualism has traditionally been the norm, with new languages being absorbed into the language ecology (Brutt-Griffler, 2002), but there now seems to be a shift, whether stated or unstated, to an English-knowing bilingualism as the underpinning for these multilingual societies, for example, bi-literate, tri-lingual

Hong Kong (Gao, 2011) or English-dominant Singapore, with its cultural languages and Singlish (Chua, 2011). English is clearly becoming an Asian language and is being indigenised and used for local intercultural communication. In some polities where this process is more advanced, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Korea, there are signs of concern about how English is affecting the national or mother tongue languages, as well as the growing development of local varieties. These globalisation pressures are also putting pressure on minority languages and the resources available to teach them. In all the polities examined in this volume, the status of languages is in flux and policy-makers are struggling to manage outcomes that are increasingly being influenced by choices made by individuals. Perhaps in a globalised and interconnected world, at least in the urban areas, it is individual choice rather than government decisions that makes a difference to policy outcomes.

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