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Globalization and Linguistic Paradoxes in Asian Countries

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To respond to the rapid changes brought about by globalization, a number of Asian countries have revisited their language policies to ensure that their people are adequately equipped with one of the global literacy skills, English. This has given rise to linguistic paradoxes. In some countries, the promotion of English by governments to boost their national strength has legitimated the hegemony of English often over and above their own national languages. This, in their view, has posed a serious challenge to the national identities and cultural traditions of their people. In other countries, the spread of English resulting from their open door economic policies has deepened class and ethnic divides within their own countries but has also fostered resistance to linguistic and political domination. This paper elaborates on these paradoxes and how some countries have tried to resolve some of them.

National Mission and the Spread of English

Learning English has been proposed in a number of Asian countries as a national mission. In China, spurred by the successful bid for the Olympics in 2008, the government recently pronounced that learning English is for the whole nation (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). In Japan, the Ministry of Education (MEXT) has drawn up national strategies to ensure that all Japanese nationals can interact socially in English and all professionals can use English in the workplace. In South Korea, English language education has been one of the

foci of the national educational reform since the mid-nineties. In Malaysia, the government has emphasized that the nation's success in the global competition hinges on the English competence of its people.

In order to accomplish this national mission, many Asian countries have adopted English as a medium of instruction (MOI) at junior levels of education, pushed the learning of English to as early as primary one, and / or adopted English as an official language. These policy changes, or proposed changes, have generated heated debates in these countries. In Japan, the proposal to recognize English as a second official language in 2002 met with strong objections from the community for fear that it would undermine their culture, identity and proficiency in their own language (Matsuura, Fujieda & Mahoney, 2004). The proposal was eventually dropped. Instead, the government established 100 "super high schools" which use with English as the MOI in 2005 (Tsui, 2004). In S. Korea a proposal in 1999 to make English the second official language was denounced by the media and academics and the situation was depicted as a "second crisis after Japanese colonization" (Yim, 2003, p. 43). This proposal was also dropped but the government increased the percentage of English medium universities from less than 10% in 2002 to 35% in 2006. It is expected to reach 60% by 2010 (Lee, *Newsweek*, February 2007). In Malaysia, in 2003, the government reversed the mother-tongue education policy and re-introduced English as the MOI at all levels of basic education (Wong & James, 2004). The government had had a difficult task trying to persuade Malay intellectuals that the reversal was for the good

of the nation. In China, the issue of using English as the MOI is still being debated. Some tertiary institutions have already started using English as MOI in science and technology disciplines, and some private schools offer English as MOI as early as kindergarten.

In Asian countries that are still suffering from poverty and heavily dependent on international aid agencies, their language policies are shaped by these agencies' preference for English as the medium of interaction. The preference for English as the lingua franca of international organization such as ASEAN and multinationals is another contributing factor. In Cambodia, English has displaced French as the most important foreign language and the MOI in tertiary institutions (Clayton, 2006). In Vietnam, all government officials are required to study foreign languages, especially English (Do, 2000). In Nepal and Bangladesh, despite the fact that the illiteracy rates are still very high, English medium education has continued or proliferated. In Pakistan, English has continued to be an official language despite its declared policy to replace it with Urdu, and English is compulsory in secondary and tertiary education. In these countries English is the language of the elite; nevertheless, the access to the internet has allowed a much wider access to English beyond the education system (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007; Rahman, 2007; Sonntag, 2007). In all of the above Asian countries, the learning of English as a compulsory subject has been pushed to an earlier age at primary level at either Grade 3 or Grade 1, even in rural areas where the shortage of English teachers is very serious.

Linguistic Paradoxes

How have Asian governments tried to resolve the linguistic paradoxes? In China, political independence and economic self-reliance had been celebrated as characteristic of national greatness. In recent years, the impending adversities of globalization have been constructed by political leaders to justify opening up the country (Moore, 2000). The mission of the English curriculum, as stated in a recent draft of *New English Curriculum for Schools*, March 2005, is to “understand the difference between Chinese and Western cultures, and *enhance patriotic education*” (my emphasis). Similarly, in Japan, the potential adversities that Japan is facing have been used to reconstruct national identity although its socioeconomic situation is very different from that in China. Globalization (*garobaruka*) has been perceived as a malevolent force which has brought much suffering to Japanese people (Hashimoto, 2007). While the Japanese government recognizes the need to make drastic changes in its domestic economy, it has held firmly to its belief in self-reliance and cultural independence, and has reaffirmed the historical continuity of Japan and its cultural coherence. The MEXT policy documents re-iterated the cultivation of a Japanese identity as one of the aims of the national curriculum (Gottlieb & Chen, 2001). *Japaneseness* is promoted through “deconstructing English,” that is, removing English from the core identity of Japan by treating it as a technical tool and reaffirming the unique cultural values and qualities of the Japanese (Hashimoto, 2000, 2007).

In South Korea, national competitiveness has been constructed as hinging on the nation's English competence because of its economic dependence on foreign trade. The English curriculum has been appropriated as a mediational tool for the construction of a national cultural identity, and the English language has been appropriated for putting South Korea on the global map and representing Korean views to the rest of the world. English has been reconstructed as a new language of nationalism (Yim, 2007).

In Malaysia, nationalism has been reconstructed by directly linking learning English and strengthening the national spirit whereas the national language, which had formerly unified the nation, is now reconstructed as inadequate for moving the nation forward (Tsui & Tolfeson, 2007; Gill, 2004). English has been reconstructed as a weapon which would help Malaysians to defend the country and learning English as a patriotic act. Similar to South Korea, the English curriculum has been used as a mediating tool to resolve the paradox. Locally produced English textbooks have given equal importance to developing a global outlook and enhancing national pride and have celebrated national cohesiveness, ethnic harmony, ethnic integration and cultural assimilation (David & Govindasamy, 2007).

In Singapore, to address the linguistic tension between the construction of a national identity in English and the traditional values and cultures are integral to ethnic identities, the government has appealed for mutual accommodation and respect between the "heartlanders" and the "cosmopolitans" and has urged the nation to maintain high standards in

English for international competitiveness and to preserve the multicultural heritage of the country. It encourages students to develop biliteracy and bilingualism in English and their ethnic mother tongue (Pakir, 2004).

In countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Pakistan and Vietnam, the legitimation of the prestige of English and English medium education has given rise to a paradox of a different kind. In these countries, the state language is the dominant language, often to the exclusion of other ethnic languages. This kind of state-legislated linguistic hegemony is oppressive and divisive. Consequently, English medium education has become a form of resistance to linguistic domination and a way to maintain the languages, cultures and identities of the ethnic minorities. It has fostered multilingualism and multiculturalism. In countries that are politically intolerant and oppressive, the access to English has made available moral and civic values that are central to liberal societies and has fostered resistance against political oppression (Rahman, 2004, 2007).

Conclusion

In the economically stronger countries, national cultural identities have been constructed by their governments through the very discourse that legitimated the hegemony of English. The learning of English has been linked to the country's future and constructed as helping the country to achieve its national mission without losing its cultural uniqueness and its continuity with past traditions. In short, English learning has been appropriated by these

governments as the mediating tool for resolving the linguistic paradox. In countries that are still struggling economically and/or politically, English has become a resource for resisting linguistic hegemony and democratization. It is envisaged that attempts to resolve or cope with these paradoxes will continue to shape the language policies in the next few decades.

(1,523 words, 9993 characters with space, excluding title)

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