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English and language-in-education policy in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum

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The ASEAN Plus Three Forum is a regional forum that facilitates political, economic and educational cooperation between the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that are located in Southeast Asia and three countries located in East Asia. The former comprise Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand; while the latter include Japan, China and South Korea. In the ASEAN Plus Three Forum, English plays increasingly significant roles – it has now become the working language of the ASEAN Economic Community member states (Stroupe & Kimura, 2015) whose population reaches 625 million people, and is now considered a massive educational market in East Asia such as Japan (Hammond, 2013).

However, it remains unclear how this emerging prominence of English has brought implications to the important nexus between language and educational policy in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum. While recent publications have provided invaluable contributions to describing the shared challenges that the ASEAN Economic Community state members face in their efforts to increase their citizens' English language proficiency (see Bigalke & Sharbawi, 2013; Stroupe & Kimura, 2015), little is known about how the ASEAN Plus Three member states develop their language-in-education policies. This is the impetus for this special issue of *Asian Englishes* (volume 18, issue 3). As Guest Editors of this volume we are interested in compiling articles that address the role of English and language-in-education policy in the ASEAN Plus Three member states.

Addressing the issue is of paramount importance given two major considerations. The first concerns the consequences arising from the emerging politics of the members of the ASEAN Plus Three Forum in the post-Second World War period in East and Southeast Asia. The post-war period, for many members of the Forum, is the period in which they achieved independence from colonialism. According to Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat (2017), independence resulted in the greater role of language-in-education policy in consolidating national language(s) and establishing foreign language policy within the contexts of national identity, economic development, modernisation and global economy participation among the Forum members.

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But it is ironic that English, the language often associated with colonialism and imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), holds an important place in this regard. English has become the driving force for globalisation with influences that have crossed the linguistic sphere and even permeated the economic, political, cultural, ideological and religious ones. Its influence reaches the global level, and ASEAN Plus Three Forum members are certainly within its grasp. English has now been used as a lingua franca for international and intra-national communication among people with different national, cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum (Kirkpatrick, 2012, 2014). The compilation of a corpus of English used as a spoken lingua franca by Asian multilinguals, known as the Asian Corpus of English, provides further evidence for this contention. Asian multilinguals discuss topics that are relevant and important to them within the Asian cultural contexts (Kirkpatrick, Patkin, & Wu, 2013). In doing so, they have taken ownership of English, leaving behind the Anglo-American cultural frame of reference, while using English as a lingua franca in new fields and contexts that fit their local cultures. Two notable examples are the use of English for Islamic values in boarding schools in Indonesia and the indigenisation of English to refer to local cultural phenomena such as *kampung* [village] and *adat* [mores] that have become part of Malay English (Kirkpatrick, 2016).

The second consideration is related to linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity within the ASEAN Plus Three Forum. East and Southeast Asia where the Forum is situated is in fact the most linguistically, culturally and ethnically diverse region in the world. There are approximately 2500 world languages found there, spoken by many more ethnicities (Ethnologue, 2017a, 2017b). National languages have been strongly supported in education systems but there are concerns regarding the preservation of the indigenous and or heritage languages. For South Korea and Japan that are largely monolingual, this is not a major problem. But for highly diverse countries such as China (Feng & Adamson, 2015), the Philippines (Martin, 2005), Indonesia (Hamied, 2013) as well as Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar (Lo Bianco, 2013), this is an issue of grave concern.

This is exacerbated by the presence of English that escalates language-in-education policy contestation within the highly diverse countries. In Indonesia, the issue is about primary schools dropping indigenous and or heritage languages in order to accommodate curricular space for English (Zein, 2017). Meanwhile, further divide between the privileged elite and the rest has been seen in South Korea, Japan and China (Butler, 2014; Hu & McKay, 2012) where social and professional institutions tend to favour those having access to English language education. Similarly, a wider economic gap occurring amidst and as a result of English language education has also been seen among the urban middle-class 'haves' and the poorer rural 'have nots' (Martin, 2005). In Myanmar, decades of political turmoil and military intervention have contributed to the conflicts arising in the country where 52 ethnicities and 48 languages struggle to achieve social harmony while English is entering the linguistic landscape (Lo Bianco, 2015; also Wong, this issue).

It is through these two policy considerations that the three articles in this special issue are brought together. The first, written by Subhan Zein, examines the complexity surrounding the access policy of primary English education in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum. His article identifies the complex motivations underpinning the introduction of English into primary schools, citing the economic imperatives of globalisation and language acquisition rationale as the driving forces. The article also identifies the mounting challenges that ASEAN Plus Three member states have to tackle, especially when it comes to introducing

English alongside the national language and indigenous and or heritage languages as well as reducing the economic divide that has resulted from English language education. The author argues that the issue with primary English education in ASEAN Plus Three member states is not whether English should be in the primary curricula. Rather, it is about how can it be best placed in the curricula alongside other language(s) and how it helps to reduce the widening socio-economic gap already occurring within the society in the member states instead of exacerbating it.

The second article is situated in Myanmar. Mary Wong investigates how linguistic, religious and ethnic identities impact language use in education, as well as the processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation. She suggests that seminaries in Myanmar provide opportunities to investigate how ethno-linguistic minorities use language and religion as resources to foster social cohesion. Working with participants who represented four ethno-linguistic minority groups in seminaries in different areas across the country, the author describes how each of the participants employed multilingual practices in an attempt to preserve local languages and to promote peace and reconciliation. As seminary teachers, these participants also saw their religious identity as a resource to promote their linguistic heritage and encourage reconciliation within their home states or as a vehicle to protest oppression and injustice. Through her study, the author demonstrates how both students and teachers can become ‘agents of national reconciliation.’

The third article, by Subhan Zein and Sivpheng Haing, classifies Cambodia as one of the countries in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum whose aspirations for social development and modernisation have given English a crucial role in education reforms. In the context of a Cambodian higher education institution where their study took place, the authors shift our attention away from only thinking about the professional learning of teachers to teacher educators. The authors argue that teacher educators’ professional learning is vital. They maintain that providing teacher educators with support in terms of enhancing their qualifications as well as providing them with field experiences and professional supports to sustain their professionalism are hugely important. This is relevant to the massive language-in-education policy changes in English that Cambodia has undergone in recent years.

The ASEAN Plus Three region represents one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse areas globally. The adoption of English as the administrative language of the ASEAN has also resulted in an increased focus on English in the educational systems of member states. In a region where minority groups struggle to maintain their linguistic heritage and preserve their local languages, the introduction of increased English language education may complicate an already complex mosaic of linguistic and ethnic relationships across the region (Hamied, 2012; Lo Bianco, 2014). But the question that social groups and governments in ASEAN are facing is not whether English language education is important to the region, for it seems to carry on regardless (Zein, this issue). The biggest concern now seems to be how English can be most appropriately and effectively integrated into existing educational systems, while at the same time preserving local linguistic diversity. The articles included in this special issue highlight some of the opportunities that exist as educational systems and local communities face these challenges.

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