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Access policy on English language education at the primary school level in the ASEAN Plus Three member states: motivations, challenges and future directions

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ABSTRACT

With English becoming increasingly important for achieving success in twenty-first-century global competition, policies to introduce the language to primary school children have proliferated in Asia, including the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three member states. Although there have been attempts to evaluate English language-in-education policies at the primary school level in Asia, no cross-national study has systematically examined the issue in the context of ASEAN Plus Three member states: Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, China, Japan and South Korea. This article examines access policies on English language education at the primary school level in those member states. It outlines access policy from the language-in-education policy perspective and discusses the motivations underpinning it. It also analyses challenges to providing primary school children with access to English through scrutiny of literature. Finally, future directions in relation to policy and research are provided.

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ASEAN Plus Three; English; language-in-education policy; language acquisition

Introduction

As we are entering the second half of the 2010s, we have reached an era where bilingual and multilingual proficiencies are increasingly perceived to be critical for success in the globalised world. With English becoming increasingly important for achieving success in the twenty-first-century global competition, policies to introduce the language to primary school children have proliferated in Asia in the past decade. This policy trend holds true in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Plus Three Forum, which is a continent-regional forum dedicated to the exchange and improvement of education, policy and economy among its members. Primary school English education policies are found in the member states of the ASEAN, consisting of Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The same case applies to the ASEAN member states' counterparts or the Plus Three countries: China, Japan and South Korea. In each of these countries, the number of young children learning

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English at the primary schooling level, typically children from age 7 to 12, has increased considerably over the years (see Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2011; Chua, 2010; Haji-Othman & Sharbawi; Kang, 2012; Kounnavongsa, 2013; Ng, 2016; Paw, 2013; Phuong & Nhu, 2015; Qi, 2016; Rañosa-Madrunio, 2013; Sermsongswad & Tantipongsanuruk, 2013; Tweed & Som, 2015; Zein, 2017a).

Although there have been some attempts to evaluate English language-in-education policies at the primary school level in the Asian context (e.g., Baldauf, Kaplan, & Kamwangamalu, 2010; Baldauf, Kaplan, Kamwangamalu, & Bryant, 2011; Kaplan, Baldauf, & Kamwangamalu 2011), there has been no cross-national study that systematically examines the policies in ASEAN Plus Three member states. Moreover, previous studies only made general observations of various policy issues in selected Asian countries (e.g. curriculum policy, methodology policy, personnel policy), rather than in-depth examination of a specific policy goal. Of the various policy goals on English language education at primary school level, access policy is a highly complex one (see Baldauf et al., 2010, 2011; Kaplan et al. 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2012); therefore, such an important policy should be carefully examined particularly in the context of the ASEAN Plus Three member states.

To study the ASEAN Plus Three member states is of high importance. There is a significant population residing in the ASEAN Plus Three member states, reaching approximately two billion people, or one-quarter of the world's population. Many of these people have become increasingly accustomed to encountering, learning and using English in daily life, with younger generations very likely to have been exposed to English since an early age. Scrutinising access policies on primary school English education in the ASEAN Plus Three member states, therefore, would provide significant input to the policy practice in these states while signposting directions for other countries in different parts of the world.

To do so, this article starts with a definition and overview of the implementation of access policy in terms of English language education in the ASEAN Plus Three member states. The article then specifically looks at the underlying motivations for the introduction of the policies in the surveyed countries. These include the putative efficacy of early English language education for successful acquisition, socio-economic imperative, parental pressure, societal meritocracy, national building and political hegemony. The article also discusses the challenges of the access policies facing the ASEAN Plus Three member states, such as the argument on policy postponement, the appropriate length of instruction, the issues relating to providing equal access and the academic gap as well as the transition to secondary level schooling. Finally, the article discusses future directions for access policy on English language education at a primary school level in the ASEAN Plus Three member states.

Access policy: definition and implementation

Access policy is a fundamental aspect of language-in-education policy that designates who learns what language(s), when and for how long (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005). 'Who' specifically refers to the designation of the group of learners who are going to learn language(s). This includes whether the learners are young learners, adolescents or adults; and whether they are members of a certain community group such as immigrants, indigenous people, a regionally based community or a profession-based community. 'What language(s)' refers to the language(s) intended for instruction to the group of people under the 'who' category. This could either be the mother tongue, a language that has the status as a national language,

an indigenous language, a heritage language or an additional language in a second or foreign language context. 'When' designates the age or level at which the chosen language(s) is taught to the group of people, while 'for how long' indicates the length of instruction in which the language needs to be taught.

Kaplan and Baldauf (2005) argued that access policy is of significant importance for a polity to achieve its social, economic or political goals. Access policy identifies when and for how long certain groups of people receive language instruction. It also provides guidelines to the design and development of language programmes, whether occurring at the school, professional or community level.

In terms of access policies on English language education at the primary school level, studies in Malaysia (Ali et al., 2011), Singapore (Chua, 2010), Indonesia (Zein, 2017a), Brunei Darussalam (Haji-Othman & Sharbawi, 2015), Laos (Kounnavongsa, 2013), Vietnam (Phuong & Nhu, 2015), Myanmar (Paw, 2013), the Philippines (Rañosa-Madrunio, 2013), Cambodia (Tweed & Som, 2015), Thailand (Sermsongswad & Tantipongsanuruk, 2013), Japan (Ng, 2016), South Korea (Kang, 2012) and China (Qi, 2016) demonstrate how English holds significant value in each of the polities in the ASEAN Plus Three Forum. This results in the increasing number of children receiving primary school English language education every year. Table 1 presents an overview of the teaching of English being introduced to primary school children in ASEAN Plus Three countries. The table shows that there is no uniformity of practice in English language-in-education policies at the primary level among ASEAN Plus Three member states. While some countries teach English as a subject or 'language activities' to children in Primary 4–6, others introduce it to children from Primary 1; and there are countries that use English as the medium of instruction for certain subjects.

Differing policies; complex motivations

Every language policy is driven by underlying motives, and so are English language-in-education policies in the ASEAN Plus Three member states. First, the prevalent view in ASEAN Plus Three countries such as South Korea, Japan and China (Butler, 2014a; Hu, 2007) and

Table 1. Overview of English language teaching in primary schools in ASEAN Plus Three countries.

ASEAN Plus Three country	Status of English in primary curriculum	Starting level	Length of instruction/week
Malaysia	Compulsory	Primary 1	300 minutes in public schools
Brunei Darussalam	Medium of instruction	Primary 1	Used in mathematics and science
Singapore	Medium of instruction	Primary 1	Used in all subjects
Indonesia	Optional	Primary 1	2 × 45 minutes
The Philippines	Compulsory	Primary 1	Used in all subjects
Myanmar	Compulsory	Primary 1	1 × 40 minutes
Cambodia	Compulsory	Primary 4	2–4 hours
Vietnam	Compulsory	Primary 3	4 × 45 minutes
Laos	Compulsory	Primary 3	2 × 45 minutes
Thailand	Compulsory	Primary 1	Primary 1–3, 1 hour; Primary 4–6, 2 hours
China	Compulsory	Primary 3	Primary 3–6, 3 × 40 minutes
Japan	Compulsory	Primary 5	45 minutes
South Korea	Compulsory	Primary 3	Primary 3–4, 2 × 40 minutes; Primary 5–6, 3–4 × 40 minutes

Note: Data only include instruction in public schools.

Indonesia (Zein, 2017a) is that policy-makers or educational administrators appear to have accepted the notion 'the earlier the better', or they have simply succumbed to citizenry pressure subscribing to this notion. Even primary school students who comprised Qi's (2016) respondents in her study in China also believed in this notion; that early English language education would provide them with substantial linguistic advantages which cannot be attained by older starters. The basis for this idea comes from the Critical Period Hypothesis in language acquisition. Lenneberg (1967) called the time span between two years old and puberty (around 11–13 years old) a critical period in which one can acquire native-like proficiency. He contended that puberty marks the completion of one's brain hemispheric lateralisation, hence resulting in the loss of biological predisposition that allows one to acquire a language. This is the concept of maturational constraint which suggests that native-like proficiency in a second language is not possible after puberty. The prevalence of this view among the ASEAN Plus Three societies means that parents and educational administrators alike consider children to be better learners than adults. Early English language education is expected to ease children's language acquisition process, so that they can achieve strong, and even native-like, proficiency.

There is also a socio-economic imperative driving the inception of English language education policies at the primary school level. In Cambodia, the socio-economic imperative translates into the instrumental motivation for securing employment. This is evident among educational stakeholders in the country where English proficiency is attached to an accelerated pathway, and is often a prerequisite for seeking employment and job promotion. English is also important for accelerating academic progress such as passing university entrance examinations and securing overseas study scholarship. This phenomenon has resulted in the mushrooming of classes, centres, schools, institutes and universities offering programmes in English (Tweed & Som, 2015). Similarly, socio-economic development of the society in Vietnam in terms of foreign trade and businesses has been cited as one of the driving factors for the Vietnamese government to strengthen English language education, hence introducing it to primary school children (Phuong & Nhu, 2015). Sermsongswad and Tantipongsanuruk (2013, p. 50) suggested that, in Thailand, English proficiency is deemed not only as 'language skills, but life skills' that are perceived important for upward socio-economic mobility. Many elements within the Chinese diverse societies also perceive English as having a considerable impact on children's future educational and career trajectories (Butler, 2014b; Hu, 2007). A similar situation occurs in Laos where the shift towards a free market economy and the increase of foreign investment have resulted in the high demand for labourers having high English proficiency (Kounnavongsa, 2013). In Myanmar, English language proficiency is very much valued to provide lucrative employment and high salaries offered by private organisations, resulting in demands for early English language education (Paw, 2013).

In other countries such as South Korea (Kang, 2012), Japan (Machida & Walsh, 2015; Ng, 2016), Singapore (Chua, 2010), Brunei Darussalam (Haji-Othman & Sharbawi, 2015) and Indonesia (Zein, 2017a), the socio-economic imperative is more expanded, as it is related to the ability of the citizens to take part in globalisation. English language education at the primary school level is associated with increased social mobility enabling citizens' ability to achieve global competitiveness in the twenty-first century. In Japan, English is at the core of Japanese education, as the language is closely associated with higher education entry and demands to participate in globalisation. The use of English as an international

language prompted official language planners to implement primary English education, highlighting the future need where skilful Japanese workers could compete internationally in the global market (Ng, 2016). So important is the value of English for academic upgrade and social mobility in terms of globalisation that in Bruneian schools English is the medium of instruction for mathematics, science, geography history and technical subjects starting from Primary 4 (Haji-Othman & Sharbawi, 2015). 'English fever' is a term used in South Korea to denote the obsessive or frenzied level of pursuit for English. The high regard that the South Koreans have for English is pronounced in their perception of the language as critical for their country's endurance to remain globally competitive, and so they send children to study English from the lowest level of education right through to tertiary education (Kang, 2012). The South Korean government even established 'English villages' that embed interactional situations resembling a village in an English-speaking country. The villages are meant to provide children and adults alike with real-life opportunities to communicate with English native speakers (Song, 2011).

In Singapore, language-in-education policy is dominated by economic concerns, and the Singaporean government ensures that language-in-education policy initiatives enhance the quality of its citizens in an attempt to build the economy and modernise the country. The Singaporean government believes that English would enable Singaporeans to remain competitive in an increasingly internationalised economy. Nonetheless, with the educational philosophy in Singapore pointing to assurance of opportunity for all, English language education is also seen as a meritocratic tool. Singaporeans who mainly speak either Malay, Tamil or Mandarin as their mother tongue therefore also see English that is used as a medium of instruction in primary school as a tool for providing equal opportunity for all citizens to succeed, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds (Chua, 2010).

The aforementioned motivations taken together have resulted in parental pressure affecting the perceptions of school administrators and policy-makers. One common strand uniting parents' perceptions is that failure to provide English language education policies at the primary school level is synonymous with jeopardising children's early acquisition, hence compromising their chances to succeed in the global competition. Parental pressure emphasising the importance of English is most notable in China. Not only do Chinese parents view the imperative of upgrading children's English language skills, they also invest considerable financial resources in their children's language education at an unprecedented level (Butler, 2014b). These parents may not be able to assist their children directly, but their vast financial resources enable them to find alternatives to assist their children in ways such as private tutoring, a common practice across the nation (Qi, 2016). In Indonesia (Zein, 2017a), parental pressure is most evident in the cases of parents not willing to send their children to study in a school that does not offer English language education. Thus, although English language education is only officially optional at the primary schooling level, such parental pressure has left school administrators with no choice but to offer English instruction.

Socio-economic factors also play a considerable role among urban middle-class Malaysians who view English proficiency as critical for their children's upward socio-economic trajectory, but the government has had different views. In 2002, the government decided to make English the medium of instruction for science and mathematics, but the implementation was marred by poor outcomes and teachers' inability to implement the policy. With the nationalistic paradigm of Malay language representing the Malay culture and national pride, the government endorsed a reverse policy where Malay would be used

as the medium of instruction in 2012. For the recent government, the need for a language to generate national identity and a cultural marker is considered more important than mere socio-economic imperative, and so Malay is the medium of instruction (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This policy, however, did not deter national schools from offering 300 minutes of English instruction per week. English remains a compulsory subject at the primary level, while Malay is used as the medium of instruction for all subjects (Ali et al., 2011). It appears that in Malaysia there is a need for English language education to equip children with necessary skills to succeed in the global world, and yet it is one that should not outrank the teaching of the Malay language as the country's precious cultural heritage and identity.

What appears as tangible language acquisition and socio-economic motivation within a society may also be politically directed to serve a regime's agenda. The primary English language-in-education policy in China, according to Li (2011), serves an example. In her paper Li (2011) argued that the lack of awareness among parents and teachers of the intangible unequal opportunities provided to different student populations demonstrates the ideological control exercised by the Chinese Communist Party. She further claimed that with the policy documents and curriculum texts being prescribed by the government, they are all meant to help maintain the power of the Party while ensuring the needs of social groups who could afford primary English instruction. Thus, according to Li (2011), while successfully manipulating the public discourses of English for globalisation and accelerated economic mobility, the Chinese government has exploited primary English language education policy for ameliorating their Socialist perspectives on various political, economic and educational issues. This is parallel to Kaplan and Baldauf's (2005) contention that language policy motivation appears to be more political than linguistic.

The Brunei Darussalam government has taken a quite different political stance, however. Although the role of English for equipping its citizens with skills in the global era undeniably permeates the public realm, there are also other motivations. According to Haji-Othman and Sharbawi (2015), the investments that Brunei has put into English language education, including from the primary level, are social and political capital. The purpose of English instruction is for 'nation-building, that is, to educate its people to be fluent in English to allow them to go out and engage with the outside world and to bring back new knowledge and new skills for the good of the nation' (2015, pp. 83–84).

Challenges with access policy

The motivations underlying English language-in-education policy at the primary level in the ASEAN Plus Three member states are complex, and so are the issues related to its implementation. Two most frequently cited concerns are as follows: English is taught by teachers who are neither qualified nor linguistically proficient users; and there is failure in adopting popular methodology such as Communicative Language Teaching (Baldauf et al., 2010, 2011; Butler, 2009; Kaplan et al. 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2012). These are ongoing issues confounding the implementation of English language-in-education policies at the primary level in nearly all states of the ASEAN Plus Three Forum, namely China (Qi, 2016), South Korea (Garton, 2014; Kang, 2012), Japan (Machida & Walsh, 2015; Ng, 2016), Indonesia (Zein, 2016, 2017c), Vietnam (Phuong & Nhu, 2015), Malaysia (Ali et al., 2011), Laos (Kounnavongsa, 2013), Myanmar (Paw, 2013), the Philippines (Rañosa-Madrunio, 2013), Cambodia (Tweed & Som, 2015) and Thailand (Sermsongswad & Tantipongsanuruk,

2013). Despite criticisms against English language-in-education policy at the primary level on the basis of these two major challenges (Baldauf et al., 2010, 2011; Kaplan et al. 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2012), it is beyond the purview of this article to explicate them in full. Further research needs to be conducted in each of these two areas. Thus, this article will focus specifically on challenges related to access policy as follows.

One issue is related to children's cognition. Scholars working on language policy domain agree with researchers in the second language acquisition (SLA) domain, arguing that a certain level of cognitive maturity is prerequisite to successful learning in the absence of considerable input. Kaplan et al. (2011), for example, argued that language learning outcomes for children that are suggested in the policies are inappropriate because the policies cannot help children to reach fluency (Kaplan et al., 2011). The late Indonesian scholar Alwasilah (2012) corroborated this notion, arguing that primary English language education is not to the benefit of children in multilingual societies due to their cognitive immaturity. Alwasilah asserted that young children 'are confused by a barrage of linguistic input. This linguistic confusion does not lead to effective learning' (2012, p. 7). In a similar vein, when discussing policies in ASEAN countries, Kirkpatrick (2012) believed that 'it could be more effective and efficient to delay the introduction of English until the secondary school', since by then 'children will be cognitively mature' (p. 341).

Kirkpatrick (2012) also made the proposal to postpone English language instruction until secondary school on the basis of the multilingual context of ASEAN countries. He stated that:

> The fact that English is also now being introduced as a compulsory subject into the primary curriculum in all the 10 countries with the exception of Indonesia adds to the threat for local languages, as English almost always replaces a local language in the primary curriculum. (Kirkpatrick 2012, p. 340)

Thus, the case of schools replacing local languages in the curricula in order to create space for English has been widely criticised as far as the preservation of local languages is concerned (Baldauf et al., 2010, 2011; Kaplan et al. 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2012).

The next issue is related to the length of English instruction. In the majority of the countries, 'fluency', which is an orally oriented outcome of communicative competence, has been stipulated as the goal of instruction. It appears that educational stakeholders believe primary English language education would provide children with longer hours of instruction. The accrued hours of instruction are considered to be appropriate in the facilitation of input and the use of language in meaningful communicative tasks. This is clearly a perception that reflects belief in the notion of 'the younger the better', underscoring the idea that by simply introducing children to English they can pick up the language effortlessly. However, scholars working in the language-in-education policy domain argued that the aspiration to achieve fluency is unreasonable. Kaplan et al. (2011) asserted that the number of hours allocated for primary English language education is still 'grossly inadequate to achieve any sort of fluency' (p. 107). Baldauf et al. (2010) stated that the limited hours are equated to undervaluation of the importance of exposure and only exacerbate the implementation of the policy. This is in line with the assertion of researchers working in the SLA domain who believe that considerable length of exposure is vital for success in early foreign language learning (e.g., Cenoz, 2003; Larson-Hall, 2008; Muñoz, 2014).

Another growing concern regarding access policy on primary English language education in the ASEAN Plus Three member states is the growing inequality between different

social classes in a society. First, the issue is related to the power relegation and distribution of policy resources from the central to the local governments. With the Japanese central government providing less specialised direction for teachers and local administrators as well as insufficient funding, greater freedom is given to the local governments to develop their own curricula, resources and instructional approaches. However, Butler (2007) argued that if the Japanese government did not ensure uniformity in the quality and practice of primary English language education, 'the result would be the creation of a substantial disparity in access to foreign language education by region and social class, ultimately leading to an achievement gap' (p. 143). Butler's warning found its ground, because the second issue exists in relation to the economic hierarchy within the Japanese society itself. In China, there are societal elements that perceive English proficiency as a highly valorised symbolic capital. Mastery of the language is a means for achieving access to better opportunities in terms of status and power. English is a highly regarded cultural capital that is expected to bring high exchange values among members of Chinese society (Hu & Alsagoff, 2010), hence primary English language education reinforces this perception. The economically privileged members of South Korean society display quite a similar attitude to their elite counterparts in China. While primary English language education embodies the spirit of English for globalisation, the spirit is exploited by the elites to provide their children with opportunities held outside of the formal school system, including private tutoring, cram schools and study-abroad programmes.

There has been limited evidence found in other contexts in the ASEAN Plus Three member states, but studies in South Korea, Japan and China show that primary English education has only deepened social inequalities; it eventually enlarges achievement gaps among students coming from different socio-economic status (SES) (Butler, 2014b, 2015; Qi, 2016; Song, 2011). Butler's (2014b) studies, for example, reveal that SES is influential in determining children's performance in the early stages of their acquisition, with the oral domain showing the greater gain. In particular, parents with high SES profile have been able to provide their children with greater resources and opportunities to use English outside school, which is influential in the academic outcomes of their children as well as the sustenance of their motivation (Butler, 2015). For this reason, English has become a tool for power hierarchy conservation for the elites (Hu & Alsagoff, 2010; Song, 2011). Song (2011) alleged that English has been directed socially in the guise of globalisation in order to exploit the deceptive meritocratic ideology to the advantage of the elites but at the expense of the lower classes of the society.

This situation results in a complex transition involving children entering secondary school. Children coming from different SES backgrounds who attend the same school may not find relatively similar pathways to transition into secondary schools. This has been observed in various contexts in Japan (Butler, 2007; Yoshida, 2012) and China (Qi, 2016). While there are children, usually coming from high SES backgrounds, who have been well equipped with English training and resources, others who come from lower SES backgrounds tend to struggle. This is a cause of concern for secondary school English teachers who have to cope with widely diverse learning abilities in the classroom. As a consequence, many struggle to provide learners with effective instruction catering for the different needs of the individuals (Yoshida, 2012). Moreover, the practice of traditional instructional approaches maintained by secondary school English teachers could adversely

affect the transition of high-achieving learners from the primary to the secondary levels (Butler, 2007).

Discussion and future directions

The motivations underpinning access policy for English language education at primary schools in ASEAN Plus Three member states and the challenges concerning its implementation are complex. I do not pretend to know all the answers. Rather, in this article I take a stance of policy and research signposting.

First, there are no signs that governments in the ASEAN Plus Three member states are planning to postpone English instruction. Whether they use their policy to ameliorate their Socialist perspectives as in China (Li, 2011) or they intend it to develop national capacity and continent-regional integration as in Brunei Darussalam (Haji-Othman & Sharbawi, 2015), ASEAN Plus Three member states seem to be more interested in strengthening their policy. ASEAN Plus Three member states seem to demonstrate a stronger motivation to equip their citizens with English proficiency as in Vietnam's National Foreign Language 2020 Project (Phuong & Nhu, 2015) or intent on benefitting from the strong support poured in by international agencies as in Cambodia (Tweed & Som, 2015). Additionally, the socio-economic gravities within each society are too powerful a catalyst to be ignored. Even in the case of ambivalent language-in-education policy in Indonesia where primary English education was abolished a few years ago, the overwhelming influence of socio-economic motivation and parental pressure cannot go unnoticed (Zein, 2017a). With English gaining momentum for ASEAN integration in particular (Stroupe & Kimura, 2015), English language-in-education policies at primary level in ASEAN Plus Three countries are highly unlikely to reverse direction.

The stance to retain the policies is even stronger because the suggestion to postpone them on the basis of children's cognitive immaturity is not justified theoretically (Zein, 2017b). Although there are SLA studies purporting the maturity of older learners (e.g., Cenoz, 2003; Muñoz, 2006, 2008), other studies suggest cognitive maturity is not the monopoly of older learners (e.g., Hidaka et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 2011). I showed elsewhere (Zein, 2017a) that a parallel line running between these seemingly contradictory studies is that they are under the umbrella of age effects research. Such studies are undertaken to inform policy of the time to start instruction through a comparison between younger learners and older learners (Muñoz, 2008). However, questioning whether younger learners have advantages over older learners, or vice versa, might not offer much to language-in-education policy-making (Zein, 2017b). I have shown that there are four reasons why this is so. One is that studies under the age effects umbrella only generate contradictory results. Contradictory findings appear in studies that investigate initial learning efficiency, learning rate and eventual learning outcomes. This might be because those studies did not take into account the variation occurring in maturational constraint or the initial disagreement among researchers regarding its exact nature (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). Secondly, the age effects studies do not consider the second language and foreign language as a continuum. Such a continuum means that that 'contextual variation in SLA is multifaceted' and 'no single variable can capture all the relevant dimensions' (Housen et al., 2014, p. 107). Furthermore, the appropriateness of the term 'age' has been widely questioned. SLA research has identified age as a macro-variable that aggregates multiple co-dependent factors: biological-cognitive factors

(e.g. state of neurological and cognitive development and neuroplasticity); socio-psychological factors that include individual differences such as motivation, aptitude, individual learning styles and strategies; and experiential factors, including the amount and distribution of L1 (First Language) and L2 (Second Language) input, type and quality of input, contexts of use and contacts with L2 native speakers (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). Fourth, age effects studies are laden with methodological problems. As DeKeyser (2013) stated, '[t]here is little research on age effects that meets very high methodological standards … and almost no evidence that is clearly of educational relevance' (p. 61) (see Zein, 2017b, for a full review).

Thus, using age effects studies for policy-making purposes may not be the most prudent decision. Although primary English language education might not produce significant outcomes in terms of language acquisition, policy-makers in the ASEAN Plus Three member states can be certain that the policy is still worthwhile. Recent studies show that children are not really cognitively immature, even when they only have very limited classroom exposure such as two 45-minute lessons per week (Shintani, 2011) and when exposure to the target language outside school is very little, or even none (Shintani, 2015). At the very outset, it is an important step for children to develop positive attitudes towards the language (Qi, 2016), to build awareness of diverse cultures and to develop tolerance and understanding (Driscoll, Earl, & Cable, 2013) – all are important features for the integration that are expected to occur within ASEAN countries (Stroupe & Kimura, 2015) and their Plus Three counterparts.

A policy issue of high importance is the place of English in the primary curricula. It has been suggested that ASEAN countries postpone primary English language-in-education policy to give space for local languages (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 2012). As sound as the suggestion is, it is necessary to consider the local context of each individual member state and the recent attitudes towards English among its users. Most Asian countries are multilingual and multiethnic, and this is certainly the case with ASEAN Plus Three member states, except probably South Korea and Japan. Indonesia has at least 400 ethnicities, while Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand have plenty too. Within these multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual countries, there appears to be a shift towards English-knowing bilingualism at the heart of what it means to be a multilingual society. Two notable examples are the bi-literate, tri-lingual Hong Kong, a special administrative government of China (Gao, 2011), and English dominant Singapore, which has ethnic languages such as Hokkien and Tamil as well as its own variation of English: Singlish (Chua, 2011). With English becoming an Asian language, undergoing an indigenisation process and being used for intercultural communication purposes (Baldauf et al., 2011), its place is even more important in ASEAN Plus Three member states. Most multilingual Asian countries 'have the common goals of nation building, full integration with the global economy and full participation in international politics' (Tsui, 2004, p. 1), and so do the ASEAN Plus Three member states.

Thus, a balancing act of language-in-education policy-making that takes into account the endogenous factors relating to local interests as well as the exogenous factors concerning the crucial role of English in globalisation is necessary (Tsui, 2004). Within this line of reasoning, ASEAN Plus Three member states need to concern themselves with three factors: the promotion of a national or official language; the preservation of indigenous, local or indigenous languages identified with linguistic and cultural identities; and the propagation

of the teaching of English which enables them to participate in the global world. This suggests the inevitable place of English in the primary schooling curricula in the ASEAN Plus Three member states. The question is not whether English should be in the primary curricula, but how can it be best placed in the curricula alongside other language(s), and for how many hours? If it should be as many hours as possible, as SLA researchers suggested, can this proposal really work in multilingual ASEAN Plus Three countries? How can the relationship between English and other languages be a complementary rather than competing one? For highly multilingual countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and China, these questions are very complex. They are beyond the scope of this article and warrant further research.

The next important issue is narrowing the achievement gaps among children occurring due to varying SES backgrounds, which is also related to the transition of schooling to the secondary level. As discussed earlier, these issues have not been widely researched in other ASEAN Plus Three member states, but local projects in certain countries such as China have been developed. Butler (2014c) reported that Changzhou has developed policy initiatives aimed to reduce academic gaps and to ensure better schooling transitions. These policy changes include the following: rotating effective teachers; providing weekend tuition for students needing assistance; and requiring prestigious high schools to accept some groups of students from less prestigious junior high schools. At the Jiangsu provincial level, the government relegates authority to schools to modify the English curriculum and lower the standards of English coursebooks. Although these changes have to some extent reduced the academic gaps, Butler (2014c) also argued that they reflect ambivalent attitudes about English education. On the one hand, the first three policy initiatives are clearly aimed to reduce academic gaps by ensuring equal access to English education. But on the other hand, granting greater local autonomy to schools may actually result in widening the academic gaps, because schools are strongly confounded by SES (Butler, 2014c). This is especially true when comparisons are made between public schools and private schools reserved for well-off individuals that usually provide longer tuition of English and better learning facilities.

Although such academic gaps resulting from SES may not be too apparent in ASEAN Plus Three member states that have relatively small populations with more stable economies and a relatively equal society such as Brunei Darussalam and Singapore, the gaps are common in Cambodia, Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand and the Philippines. These countries may wish to adopt similar policies to China, but it is likely that they could face similar dilemmas to the conflicting policy situation found there. The bottom line is that research in the local context of these countries is necessary because English language education and SES research has not been conducted there, and as Butler (2014c) noted, solutions are yet to be found.

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