

Building English Language Competency: English as the Official Language of ASEAN

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8 Themes

‘Building EL Competency’ is one of them

I was asked to prepare the position paper (from which this talk is taken).

(i) Background to English in ASEAN

(ii) Challenges associated with English being made the sole working language of ASEAN (including EMI in HE)

(iii) Challenges for EL Teachers and assessment

(iv) 'Solutions'

ASEAN was first formed in 1967 with the signing of the Bangkok Declaration

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand

Now ten countries with Brunei (1984); Vietnam (1995); Laos and Myanmar (1997), Cambodia (1997)

Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter states that, 'The working language of ASEAN shall be English'

Current school level of the introduction of English across ASEAN

(see Handout)

Basic trend among MoEs in the region is for an increasingly early intro. of English at primary level and a growth in the number of programmes offered through EMI at tertiary level.

English in ASEAN

‘National’ varieties of English (Singaporean/Filipino etc.)

ELF is most common role of English in the region

The major role of English *across* ASEAN is as a lingua franca for Asian multilinguals for whom English is an additional language (cf Asian Corpus of English [ACE] [<http://corpus.ied.edu.hk/ace/>])

Issues and Challenges: Three myths of language education (Benson 2008)

- the best way to learn a second language is to use it as a medium of instruction
- to learn a second language, you must start as early as possible
- the home language gets in the way of learning a second language

Unthinking belief in these three myths has led to many of the challenges now facing the teaching and learning of English across ASEAN.

Myth # 1: it has been estimated that a child needs 5-7 years learning an L2 before s/he can use it to learn cognitively challenging subjects such as maths and science(Cummins passim)

Bernardo (2000: 313), 'there seems to be no theoretical or empirical basis...to obligate the use of English in teaching mathematics' and that,

'There are clear and consistent advantages to using the student's first language ...at the stage of learning where the student is acquiring the basic understanding of the various mathematical concepts and procedures.'

Rephrase 'myth #1' to read:

'a child needs *at least* five years instruction in a second language as a subject before it can be used as a medium of instruction to teach complex concepts'

Myth # 2

‘To learn a second language you must start as early as possible’

True in natural language learning environments

But

- (i) Schools are not natural language learning environments
- (ii) Adults can be very accomplished language learners

In order for successful language learning to take place at an early stage, a number of conditions need to be met.

These include:

(i) access to resources, (ii) the availability of competent, qualified and linguistically proficient teachers, (iii) a supportive language learning environment and (iv) a motivated learner who has already developed proficiency and literacy in the first language.

In a review of classroom-based studies of age and second language learning, Abello-Contesse (2009) concludes that not only is there a lack of a direct correlation between an earlier start and more successful/rapid L2 development 'but also for a strong tendency for older children and teenagers to be more efficient learners'

‘learners whose exposure to the L2 began at age 11 consistently displayed higher levels of proficiency than those for whom it began at 4 or 8’ (p. 171)

And remember this research is based on European children learning European languages
ASEAN children learning English are learning a language typologically different from their L1.

Rephrasing 'Myth # 2'

'to learn a second language, you don't have to start as early as possible; indeed a later start has proved to be beneficial'.

Myth # 3

'The home language gets in the way of learning a second language.'

All research shows that the opposite is true.

The first language acts as a bridge to second and third language learning.

What is important, however, is to ensure the child first develops fluency and literacy in the first language.

Benson (2008, p. 4)

Building a strong foundation in the L1 helps the learning of a second language more than too much early exposure to the second language. Children are able to transfer the first language skills they have developed to learning later languages (Cummins, 2008).

Rephrase 'Myth' #3

'developing fluency and literacy in the first language will help the learning of second and later languages.'

Here we can pose three questions:

- (i) When should English be introduced into the school curriculum?
- (ii) Should English be taught as a subject or as a medium of instruction?
- (iii) How can a mix of languages be equitably balanced to ensure the children become functioning multilinguals?

In addition to the early introduction of English into the primary curriculum across ASEAN, there has also been an increase in the number of EMI programmes in higher education. This is almost always a 'top-down' decision and one made without consideration. For example, Myanmar has ruled that all HE institutions must adopt EMI for all courses.

Here I list 5 key points that need to be considered before implementing EMI.

1 The development of a coherent and consistent university language education policy. Such a language policy needs to take into account any national language policy so that it articulates with it.

(cf Hong Kong's trilingual and biliterate policy with 6/8 of the govt-funded universities being EMI. All private universities are EMI)

(consider also the possible washback effect of EMI courses in HE upon primary curricula)

2. Guidelines for the implementation of EMI need to be an integral part of the university language policy. In particular, it needs to be stressed that any EMI course does not necessarily exclude the use of other languages.

3. The language policy needs to define what is meant by the 'E' in EMI.

4. The language policy also needs to recognise the importance of specific professional development for staff who are to deliver cognitively complex content through the medium of English. Professional development courses should be made available for all EMI staff.

5. Finally the language policy needs to set linguistic benchmarks for students to meet before they enrol in EMI courses, recalling that speakers of Asian languages may take longer to acquire the necessary proficiency in English than do speakers of typologically similar European languages. Relevant English courses thus need to be available for students on an ongoing basis.

A major challenge is to counteract the ‘three myths’ discussed above. It is particularly difficult to persuade parents that their children can learn English successfully if they start later – indeed that they have a better chance of learning English successfully if they start later.

A second major challenge concerns the EL proficiency and education/training of EL teachers across ASEAN.

Teacher Standards, Qualifications and Assessment

Some form of agreed minimal standards and qualifications for English language teachers is needed across ASEAN for two major reasons:

(i) to ensure that English teachers in each of the countries of ASEAN reach these minimum qualifications and standards;

(ii) to encourage English language teacher mobility across ASEAN.

Setting these standards is likely to be an extremely complex task and best met by ASEAN (or SEAMEO) establishing a regional committee of experts to work together to develop these qualifications and standards.

Currently, EL proficiency standards among many EL teachers across the region are very low

(e.g., Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia etc.)

5 Proposals that might help make EL teaching and learning in ASEAN more successful.

These based on the fact that the primary role of English in ASEAN is as a lingua franca.

These proposals / principles are based on adopting a lingua franca approach to the teaching of English.

I'll go through these briefly and we can then discuss them later

Principle#1

The goal is mutual intelligibility.

Principle#2

The goal is intercultural competence.

Principle#3

ELF speakers make good ELF teachers.

Principle#4

Lingua franca environments provide excellent learning opportunities.

Principle #5

ELF-aware teaching needs ELF –aware assessment.

References (see Handout)

Thank you.