

English as a Lingua Franca in Thailand in the Context of ASEAN Community

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Abstract

Thailand is inevitably influenced by the establishment of the ASEAN Community in several aspects. English language has been considered as one of the most important languages towards the development of the ASEAN Community and set as its working language in the ASEAN Charter. English in Thailand is called EFL before the establishment of ASEAN Community in 2015 when tourism is ranked number one in terms of income in Thailand. Tourists who are non-native speakers of English travel to Thailand and have interactions with Thai English speakers for communication. Thus, EFL is transformed into English as a Lingua Franca for intra-national, international, businesses, and communication.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca; English as a Foreign Language; The Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Introduction

A lingua franca is a contact language used among people who do not share a first language, and is commonly understood to mean a second language of its speakers (Jenkins, 2012). English as a Lingua Franca is defined as interactions between two people whose mother tongue is not English. This has been broadened to include native English speakers. Thus, EFL communication may also take place between native speakers of one of the variety of English and speakers of other languages (Ur, 2010). English plays an important role in the world today as a lingua franca. The majority of speakers are multilingual who have learned English as a second or later language. The use of English as a lingua franca is prevalent throughout the ten nations that established the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Thus, by the ASEAN Charter, English has been formally named as the sole working and official language. Besides the important implication for language policy and education, these include the relationship between English, the respective national languages of ASEAN and the literally thousands of the region's local language and mother tongue.

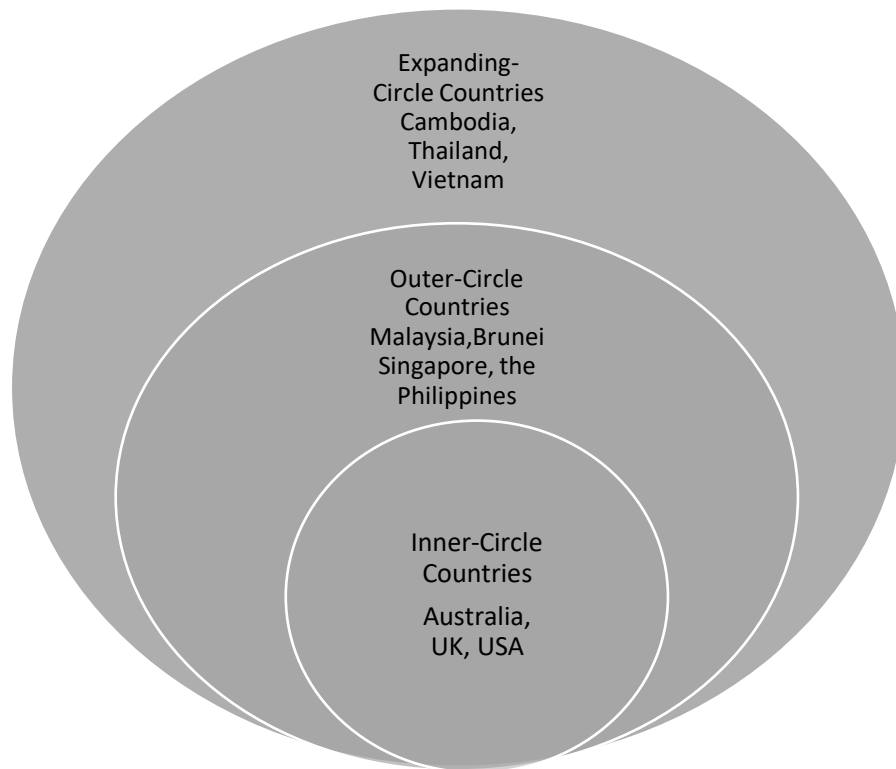
Ideally, people need to be able to develop their identity and cultural roots from their mother tongue. Hence, they will also need a regional lingua franca along with the national language. English is considered to be so essential when it is taught as the first

language in each of the countries of ASEAN. Therefore, it is introduced as a compulsory subject in primary school in each country except Indonesian where it is an optional subject in primary school and compulsory subject in secondary school. In many countries, however, it is in three countries: Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines that English is also a medium of instruction. In Singapore, it is the medium of instruction.

Thailand and ASEAN Community

The formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations was declared on 8th August, 1967 in Bangkok with the five countries of the founders: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodian in 1999. ASEAN was established during the uncertainty of politics among the ASEAN countries and the region. This included the Vietnam war was raging and the Chinese Cultural Revolution was in full swing. The ASEAN, thus was born out of a common fear (Pakir, 2010)

There are seven purposes of ASEAN as expressed in the original declaration. But there is no mention of a working language of Association and it led to the adoption of English in Charter 2, Article 34 in 2007 among the political instability in Thailand which stated that there was a shared mutual understanding among the member countries regarding the use of English. According to Kachru (1992), countries can be classified into one of three circles depending on history, role and status of English within them. Countries where English has been traditionally spoken as the major language are classified as “inner circle countries”. These include countries such as Britain, the United States and Australia. Countries which were British or American colonies and where English plays an institutional role are classified as “outer circle countries”. ASEAN members states which fall into this category include Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore because they were colonized in the past. The third group of countries where Kachru classified as “expanding circle countries” are Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. English traditionally played no internal role and was taught as a foreign language (EFL). Thailand is another expanding circle country within ASEAN that has never been colonized.



The classification of Kachru's Three Circles (1992)

In Indonesia, English is now the first second language where the promotion of a local language called Bahasa Indonesia become the national lingua franca. Before English has become an official or working language in ASEAN, there were many disputes among the ASEAN members. Vietnam became ASEAN's membership in 1995 and asked for consideration to adopt French language as ASEAN's second official language, but this request was rejected (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

In 1997, at the meeting of ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, the Malaysian Minister of Information suggested the adoption of Malay language as ASEAN's second official language. This is due to Bahasa Malay is the official language in Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and Indonesia. However, this suggestion was rejected because to accept Malay as an official language would be "opening Pandora's box" (Kirkpatrick, 2010)

When the ASEAN Community was officially formed in 2015, it was estimated that the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) would create a competitive market of over 600 million people in ASEAN countries and a gross domestic product of over US\$ 2 trillion. This includes

several advantages and full benefits to ASEAN members. Obviously, Thai people have to work and interact more with a considerable number of people from the ASEAN member countries and its counter-part. In order to achieve effective communication in the English as a lingua franca context, mastering English skills and knowledge by communicating with native English speakers is inadequate due to Thai English users' interlocutors in the workplaces are variety of speakers of English in addition to English native speakers (Kongkerd, 2013). English is the working language when ASEAN countries are transforming into a single identity and it will be used among the non-native speakers of English in ASEAN. If Thailand places emphasis on the English language, there will be greater chances and higher benefits. Thus, Thailand needs to improve its human resources in terms of English language proficiency for the rising competition in the ASEAN Community.

History of English in Thailand

English was introduced to Thailand in the early 1800s by King Mongkut or King Rama IV. King Mongkut was keen to modernize Thailand before having modernization thrust upon it (Kirkpatrick, 2010) He encouraged Western learning and the learning of English and it was well-known in Thai history. King Mongkut, thus, appointed Anna Leonowens, to teach English at royal court. This was described in Magaret London's novel, Anna and the King of Siam and later it was performed as a romantic musical drama, The King and I. English was being taught at the Thai court through the invitation of the king himself. It happened not too long after British colonization expanded to the neighbor country, Malaysia. During the thirteen century, King Rama IV discovered the stele of Ramkhamhaeng, a King of thirteenth century in Sukhothai period. It showed a standardized alphabet as early as the thirteen century and the stele is authentic. (Kirkpatrick, 2010)

Vajiravudh (King Rama VI) was the first member of the Thai royal family to be educated in the West, who brought back the modernizing idea which was not all welcomed by Thai people (Kirkpatrick, 2010) the Thai language stem was done by King Rama VI in early 1900s and provided the basis of Thai language textbooks (Kirkpatrick, 2010) King Rama VI desired to establish a national Thai identity, but he died in 1925. Luang Phibun Songkhram who became prime minister of Siam in 1938 encourage to promote a national Thai identity. He formally changed the Kingdom of Siam to Thailand and all inhabitants of Thailand would be called Thais and would be required to study Thai (Kirkpatrick, 2010)

So far, Thai language became the sole medium of instruction. Even Chinese schools had to teach through Thai (Kirkpatrick, 2010) And Thai language has been the major tool in creating of national unity and identity. Thailand is distinctive in that its population is less diverse than the population of other ASEAN nations. Thai identity has been related to the concept of Ekkalak Thai or one characteristic. The Ekkalak Thai Office campaigned for national unity and security on the basis of “one language and one culture in Thai society” (Kirkpatrick, 2010)

As Thai language has been the mother tongue among Thais in Thailand, it caused Thailand to live behind other ASEAN nations in English Language (Pinyonattthagarn, 2016). According to a research by EF on the levels of English language proficiency among youth in 44 countries, Thailand ranks 42nd, one spot lower than Cambodia, while Vietnam rank at number 39, Indonesia rank at number 34 and Malaysia rank at number 9. The Secretary-General of the Office of Education Concil has pointed out that Thailand doesn't have specific strategies in its teaching of foreign languages and Thai students do not understand the objectives of language learning. Therefore, the country must immediately reform its educational system in order to be on par with the international standard.

Among the ASEAN countries, Thailand is the only country that has never been colonized during the period of colonization. Currently, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) in all Thai government schools since Grade 1. Due to the lack of qualified teachers and resources, Thai government advertised in 2006 to recruit thousands of native English speakers to apply for jobs as English teachers in Thai schools, but the salary offered was not attractive (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Only the Thai who are highly educated as elites can speak English fluently especially in business and tourism. Thai language remains as the medium of instruction and the only official language in the country

Suwannasri and Singhanat (2017)'s drawing upon Kachru's (1992) classic circles of English that ASEAN'S member countries can be categorized into two different circles: the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. Four countries, former colonies of Inner Circle countries; India, Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore are categorized in the Outer Circle with Myanmar, a former British colony, also being classified in the same circle prior to 1962. The remaining five countries namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, are in the Expanding Circle where English has no official role within their domestic institutions. Thus,

English is used as a lingua franca between the countries in which it does not have official status (Suwannasri and Singhanat, 2017; Kongkerd, 2013) indicates the role of English as lingua franca in Thailand as an expanding circle country in accordance with Kachru's three circle classification model. Kongkerd (2013); Todd (2006) also points out that Thais who work in the Thai tourism industry mainly communicate in English as a lingua franca with foreign tourists who are primarily non-native speakers of English. Additionally, approximately 70% of tourists who visit Thailand are from Asian countries. Hence, English is clearly used as a lingua franca in the Thai tourism industry.

According to Kongkerd (2013) Thailand is expected to be the second most attractive country in ASEAN in drawing international business investment by using English as a communicative device. Consequently, English has become a tool for international companies based in Thailand. More importantly, English has played a role as the main language for interaction between the ten ASEAN member countries in the ASEAN Community since 2015. Thus, English is clearly in use as Lingua Franca in Thailand.

Teaching English as a Lingua Franca in Thailand

The Thai government has prepared many projects and activities associated with the improvement of English language in Thailand. The Ministry of Education has launched a program called, "English Speaking Year 2012" in order to encourage the use of English in piloted schools. In recent years, many schools in Thailand have started to hire native English speakers and English-speaking foreigners to teach English. But thousands of foreign speakers are only in small number. Most schools still rely on Thai teachers, most of whom unqualified, to do the job. Many don't speak the languages well enough, or have sufficient English knowledge and instruction skills guide students in their learning.. Currently, Thailand has the National Institute of Educational Test Service (NIETS) to help sharpen Thai teachers' skills. But given the NIETS's own performance as demonstrated in the O-NET, it is doubtful that the quality of Thai teachers will change for the better very soon. (Pinyonattagarn, 2016)

However, the factors contributing to the unsatisfactory of English language education in Thailand also included unqualified and inadequately-trained teachers, low-motivated students, students of mixed ability in the oversized classrooms and few opportunities for students to expose English in outside classroom. (Kirkpatrick, 2010)

Kirkpatrick (2008) mentioned that the curriculum design should be integrated into the syllabus to raise teachers' and students' awareness of the ASEAN English and change their "submission to native-speaker norms" and therefore shift the traditional status of standard English in the curriculum (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Kirkpatrick (2012) recommended the introduction of English language earlier into the primary curriculum together with the adoption of a "lingua franca approach" to English language teaching. In the ASEAN context, students can study cultures of ASEAN countries through English, including the study of pragmatic norms which means that the English language curriculum should provide opportunities for students to study the cultures of the region (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Thus, educational institutions should consider designing and developing the curriculum to be relevant to the needs of the ASEAN Community.

The result of Pakir (2010) survey research conducted to investigate the important issues which should be taken into consideration for English language teaching in Southeast Asia. The top three responses from data gathered from 337 English teachers were related to English for special purposes, teaching methods, and instructional material development.

The models of English Bilingual Education (EBE) is proven to be successful in both learners and teachers (Keyurawong, 2010). In this program, English language subjects are taught by native speakers of English, some subjects are taught in English and some in Thai. According to Keyurawong, (2010) the management of teaching and learning has been done in three aspects: methods of teaching 34-37 students in class, extra-curricular activities is planned and taught by native speaking teachers, assessment of students' development was evaluated through authentic assessment based on three main criteria: the language skills, ethics, and the students' desired characteristics. (Keyurawong, 2010) It is recommended that the Ministry of Education should set up a central body to take care of its operation for sustainability. The recruitment of qualified teachers and teaching staffs with good command of English should be conducted. Additionally, Thai and foreign teachers with exchanges of knowledge, instructional materials and learning resources should be provided to help them develop their teaching skills professionally (Keyurawaong, 2010).

Thus, English for Special Purposes should be intensively taught to students in specific fields in order to deal with the job competition among ASEAN graduates. The model in teaching English should be changed and variety of English in ASEAN should be introduced

and taught in school to make students familiar with similar and different linguistic features. The instructional materials should be developed and improved in accordance with the hi-technology such as the use of internet world-wide with the tools.

At national level, the Thai government has also encouraged higher education institutions to produce the graduates of international quality who are equipped with professional skills, language skills, and inter-cultural skills.

Significance of English in ASEAN

In ASEAN countries, new varieties of English have been developed and used by non-native English speakers in local or individual contexts with unique identities. In regard to English varieties, using English as a lingua franca is a crucial issue for ASEAN since English has become the working language after the establishment of ASEAN Community since 2015 (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

There is an increasing working competence that requires English skill predominantly. Thailand as a member country should prepare their citizens to improve both professional skills and language skills for the changing situations and new challenges. Following the launch of the AEC, the job market will become more competitive. People with higher skills in English will be at advantage (Fedrickson & Mala, 2016). When Thai workforce can improve their English language, that will be the key success factor for Thailand in ASEAN Community.

Conclusion

Thailand has become globalized with the emerging of ASEAN Community simultaneously. English will remain as a lingua franca of international communication, research, education and business transactions. Teaching English for Specific Purpose should assist schools and Thai universities as the resources by providing training for further professional development. However, the success of English language in transforming to English as Lingua Franca (ELF) requires involvement of all stakeholders such as government, education institutions, educators, teachers and students. Furthermore, Thai government should transform the English education to respond to the needs of ASEAN Community. Thai students and people should also realize the importance of mastering English as a significant method of communication of the ASEAN Community due to English as a lingua franca has been seen perspective in economic growth in the country.

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