

Is English an Asian Language?

Bilingual education and its role in the development of English in the Thai context

Some years ago, an Australian Minister of Education wrote an article opposing the expansion of Asian language teaching in Australian schools on the ground that there was really no need for this. After all, he said, English is widely spoken in Asia and extensively so at cross-national and international forums. English, he declared, is already an Asian language.

But is English really an Asian language? After all, how many Asian countries are comprised largely of English speakers? How many have English as an official language? In how many will the English-speaking traveler feel linguistically at home? With some exceptions, not many Asian countries can be classified as English-speaking in the sense that English is dominant and most citizens are comfortable using it.

Let us consider why one might assert that English is an Asian language.

1. It is spoken by many Asians, particularly when communicating with speakers of other languages.
2. In some Asian countries, it is used extensively in certain contexts – universities, schools, courts of law, legislative chambers, etc.
3. It is widely used among entertainers and their fans.
4. Significant Asian cities usually have a daily English-language newspaper.
5. It is the most widely used language of the internet, even in Asian countries where English is not widely spoken.
6. Trade, geopolitical and cultural exchanges among linguistically diverse Asian countries are conducted in English.
7. Asian countries are playing an increasingly significant role in the international community and they do this in English.

These facts may seem conclusive in support for the statement that English is an Asian language. However,

when we go to the heart of Asia we find a different story. I will define the heart of Asia for the purpose of this article as its people when they are amongst their own and engaging in activities most natural and authentic to them. I shall also focus on East and Southeast Asia for the context of the discussion.

When we look into the heart of Asia, can we really say that English is a language of Asian people? In some cases, among some citizens of, say, the Philippines, Singapore, Penang and Hong Kong, this may be true. They have grown up using English dominantly or extensively at home. Others may, through their family circumstances and education, have grafted English onto their mother tongue so effectively that they are as comfortable or nearly so in that language as in their first. However, for most East Asians, this is not the case. Let us focus on Thailand. Is English an Asian language in Thailand? That is, is English a Thai language? The question is almost laughable, but unless one can answer it in the affirmative, one cannot say that English is an Asian language; at least not for Thailand – and Thailand is an Asian country, isn't it?

Furthermore, when we consider the data referred to above from 1 to 7, to what extent do they reflect what actually happens in the linguistic intercourse that takes place in those contexts? On closer observation, what we see is that English in most Asian countries has the following features:

1. It is for most a default, a fallback language, rather than a familiar language of choice.
2. Its use is largely restricted to particular settings and subjects.
3. It is used with ease mainly by an elite nurtured by high socio-economic status and/or advanced educational opportunities.
4. Its use is often superficial and ritualistic (as in entertainment or, perhaps, structured and predictable formal circumstances).

We can agree, therefore, that English is an important language for Asia, but not an Asian language. How then can we best teach English to our children effectively without detriment to development of their mother tongue?

It is a basic principle of education that children are most naturally and effectively educated in their first language, their mother tongue, the language to which they most resort in daily life. It is also desirable that children should, through education, have access to languages of significance in their life context, in addition to the mother tongue if necessary. In Thailand, English is the priority language of significance. Hence, our children need to be educated in both languages. The purpose of bilingual education is to do exactly that in the most effective manner.

At our school, we have decided that the most effective procedure is to teach the core curriculum in both languages – English and Thai. After the initial high immersion years (infant grades), the essential concepts and terminology of a subject, eg Science, are taught first in Thai and then built on and expanded in English. We do not support the Malaysian model, where certain core subjects (Maths and Science) are taught solely in English. There is no benefit in doing that and Thai language and culture suffer where that occurs. Especially in Maths and Science, the Thai language contains the conceptual,

technical and procedural vocabulary on which those subjects are based. There is no benefit in denying Thai students the richness of their own language and intellectual tradition in these areas.

Bilingual education recognizes the child as a person, not merely a resource to be developed. A person's mother tongue is a core element in his or her identity and the natural vehicle through which to learn. Likewise, a person exists spiritually and socially by expanding, and the acquisition at school of a further language of real significance is a most empowering form for that necessary expansion.

Bilingual education affirms the child's identity and subjectivity. At the same time, it works towards the attainment of desired educational and linguistic outcomes for each child as a participant in both Thai and international society.