

Policy Direction for Thai English Language Education in an ASEAN Era: Aspirations vs Reality

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ABSTRACT

Since its inception in 1967, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has had ambitious aspirations rooted in economic prosperity, stability for the region, regional co-operation and people-to-people interconnectivity. With reference to language and communication, ASEAN specifies English as the working language of the organization and the international language for communication between ASEAN peoples. This supranational level policy has implications for English language education in ASEAN countries, including Thailand. In this paper, I explore a selection of Thai higher education policies and focus on emerging themes regarding the roles of English in Thailand and ASEAN and policy direction for English language education in Thai higher education. As supranational aspirations become operationalized through national level policy, this exploration may shed light on policy enactment in action and the likelihood of ASEAN aspirations being fulfilled.

Keywords: *ASEAN, English language education, higher education policy, intercultural communication, Thailand*

1. INTRODUCTION

My discussion in this paper is organized as follows. I begin by providing a brief overview of ASEAN, including its objectives for economic prosperity, political stability and intercultural connectivity in the region. Second, due to the privileged place of English in ASEAN as the only working language of the organization and the main international language for communication between ASEAN peoples, I explore emerging themes in a selection of current Thai policies relating to English in this ASEAN era. Next, I discuss policy direction for English Language Education (ELE) in Thai higher education (HE) before presenting some challenges in translating this policy direction into practice. I conclude with some suggestions for how the gap between actual practice and policy aspirations might become more coherent.

1.1. Asean Aspirations For Interconnected Region

ASEAN is a geopolitical organization which was established in 1967. Today, ASEAN comprises ten member states, namely: Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines and Brunei Darussalam. East Timor is a candidate member state while Papua New Guinea is an observer of ASEAN.

The motto of ASEAN, “One Vision, One Identity, One Community” has articulated an ambition to establish a regional community that comprises three pillars: the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC); the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC); and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

The AEC was launched at the end of 2015 to facilitate “movement of business persons, skilled labour and talents” [2]. The APSC is envisaged to “bring ASEAN’s political and security cooperation to a higher plane” and “will ensure that the peoples and Member States of ASEAN live in peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment” (Article 6, APSC Blueprint) [3]. The “primary goal” of the ASCC is to build an ASEAN community that is “people-centred” with “enduring solidarity and unity among the nations and peoples of ASEAN...” (Article 4, ASCC Blueprint). The ASCC “shall contribute to building a strong foundation for greater understanding, good neighbourliness, and a shared sense of responsibility” (Article 5) and “respect the different cultures, languages, and religions of the peoples of ASEAN emphasise their common values in the spirit of unity in diversity...” (Article 7).

The above characteristics and elements of each pillar reflect ASEAN’s aspirations to build a region that is interconnected economically, politically and socio-culturally. These aspirations can be achieved not only by government-to-government plans and projects but also through people-to-people connectivity. In terms of language and communication, despite the fact that there are more than a thousand languages spoken in the region [8], Article 34 under the ASEAN Charter states that “The working language of ASEAN shall be English” [1]. In addition to this privileged status, English is also the prime language for intercultural communication (IC) – interpersonal communication between people from different cultures” [7]. IC is dynamic and emergent interpersonal communication between people from differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds. IC takes place in multicultural societies such as those within ASEAN where “the boundaries between

one language and culture and another are less clearly delineated”[4].

While the promotion of ASEAN languages is mentioned in ASEAN policies, a main document such as ASCC Blueprint states that an action for advancing and prioritizing education is to “Support the citizens of Member States to become proficient in the English language, so that the citizens of the ASEAN region are able to communicate directly with one another and participate in the broader international community”. In addition to being the main language for IC, the ASCC also states that English should be promoted as “an international business language at the work place” [3].

1.2. Exploring Thai Ele in He Policies

As supranational aspirations become operationalized through national level policy, examining Thai policies may shed light on this process of policy enactment in action and the likelihood of ASEAN aspiration being fulfilled. Specifically, my paper focuses on HE due to my professional background and the fact that HE is responsible for producing human resources for the labor markets. I used the following criteria to select Thai policy documents for this study. First, the policies must be educational policies or discuss issues related to education planning. Second, as “ASEAN” has become a buzzword in Thailand, I included the policies that make reference to the integration of ASEAN. Third, all policies are related to English language and/or ELE. Finally, the policies became in effect from 2016 to the present – the period after the launch of AEC in 2015. The following is a list of the policies I included in this study:

- 1) The Government Policy Statement delivered by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Prime Minister to the National Assembly on 25 July 2019 published by the Secretariat of the Prime Minister Government House;
- 2) The National Education Scheme B.E. 2560 – 2579 (2017 – 2037) published by Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2017; and
- 3) The 12th Educational Development Plan B.E. 2560 – 2564 (2017 – 2021) published by MOE in 2017.
- 4) Raising English standard in Thai higher education institutions published by the Office of Higher Education Commission of Thailand (OHEC) in 2016.

I adopted a thematic analysis approach to identify emerging themes to analyze the policies. I read through the documents several times and paid attention to words, phrases or sentences that are in association with English language and ELE. I also searched through the documents using Thai and English keywords such as *ASEAN, English, language, and education*. I coded the documents by giving each segment a code name such as *English for ASEAN, English working knowledge and English as a weakness*. After coding, I grouped related codes into categories. For instance, the codes *English for ASEAN, English for life-long learning and English for IC* belong in the category of *Roles of English*. The coding stage was iterative, and after revising all codes and categories, I identified emergent themes.

1.3. English Language Through the Lens of Thai Policies

1.3.1. English as a Weakness for Thailand

Thai people’s lacking English language skills is one of the challenges Thailand has been facing. In the context of ASEAN integration, the National Education Plan regards ASEAN and the role of English in ASEAN as one of the “changes” that Thai people need to be “aware of, and able to cope with” (p. 7). The document mentions that Thai workers were ranked 52nd and 51st for language and information technological skills in the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 2016. In addition, a survey of entrepreneur’s demand revealed that Thai workers, both skilled and medium-skilled, possess the level of skills that is below the entrepreneur’s expectation. These skills include foreign languages (i.e. English), computer skills and specific professional skills (p. 68). The weakness in English language skills is also addressed in the 12th Educational Development Plan: “Thai workers lack most of necessary working skills, especially English language, mathematical thinking and reasoning, time managing, communication and problem-solving skills” (p. 2).

The underperformance of Thai workers is mainly rooted from Thai education system. The National Education Plan points out that Thai education system and human resources development have weaknesses in areas of sciences, English and technology (p. d). The document claims that universities are focusing on the quantity rather than the quality when it comes to producing graduates. Most graduates, therefore, lack essential skills, including English, digital literacy and professional competence (p. 100).

These policies, therefore, suggest that developing English among Thai people will open up opportunities for Thai people since the language has significant roles in Thailand, ASEAN and beyond.

1.4. Roles of English in an ASEAN Age

The policies discuss benefits of using English in various aspects in Thailand, ASEAN and world community.

1.4.1. English for ASEAN, Work and Competitiveness

The first role of English is frequently mentioned in the selected policies as the language necessary for Thailand to support ASEAN. Strategy 2.1 (Curriculum development) of the 12th Educational Development Plan asserts that Thai education must “implement intensive English language curriculum that are in line with AEC agreement to support works in ASEAN (p. 58). Moreover, English “enables learners to keep up with the ASEAN integration and the changing world and increase competitiveness of the country” (Raising English standard in Thai higher education institutions policy).

1.4.2. English for Life-long Learning

English is viewed as an important tool for life-long learning. It is the language for “researching new knowledge” and for “computer and technology” (Strategy 2.1, 12th Educational Development Plan p. 58). Similarly, English knowledge and skills can be used as a tool for accessing international body of knowledge” (the Raising

English standard in Thai higher education institutions policy). Recently, the Thai government announced that it is committed to:

Cultivate learners who are practical and self-directed in their own learning and have English language and a third language skills that can be used for communicating and knowledge seeking and are well equipped with knowledge, professional and life skills before entering the labor market (Government Policy Statement, p. 21)

English is also considered as one of the 21st Century skills. According to the National Education Plan, “Curriculums in all levels of education need to equip students with 21st Century skills, especially English, sciences and digital skills” (p. 100).

1.4.3. English for Intercultural Communication

The role of English as the language for IC in ASEAN is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

In social and cultural terms, ASEAN citizens can travel within the region faster and more conveniently. There are more and more exchanges in knowledge, cultures and technologies. Societies are becoming multicultural [...] and the fact that ASEAN has adopted English as the working language, it is necessary that Thai people are aware of, and able to cope with changes. These include equipping themselves with skills, knowledge, ability, working performance and language for communication. This in order to enable Thailand to play roles in regional collaborations and [for Thai people] to live in the ASEAN Community in peace and sustainability (National Education Plan, p. 7, emphasis added).

From the above excerpt, Thai people should be equipped with “skills, knowledge, ability, working performance and language for communication”. In this context, I inferred that such language for communication is English due to the proximity of those two terms. I took the term “communication” as IC because it is mentioned in the context of increasingly interconnected ASEAN where “ASEAN citizens” interact and “exchange their knowledge, cultures and technologies”.

This role of English as the language for IC can also be seen in the government policy statement, Strategy 3.4 regarding arts and cultures promotion:

Building knowledge and understanding of customs, traditions and cultures of neighbouring countries. Accepting and respecting diverse traditions and cultures of ethnic groups and foreigners in multicultural society by supporting foreign language learning and promoting the creation of international arts and cultures in order to be part of the world community. (p. 5, emphasis added)

This means that knowing foreign languages is a way to help Thais learn, understand, accept and respect diverse cultures of neighboring countries. However, it is not clear whether the “foreign language” in this text is a singular or plural noun as Thai language does not have a plural form for nouns. It is likely that it refers to the languages of Thailand’s neighboring countries. It can also be English specifically as English is the default foreign language in

Thailand. In addition, the mention of “international arts and cultures” and being “part of the world community” suggests to me that this language is English because of the status of English as a global language [5].

1.5. Ele Policy Direction

Based on the themes and sub-themes discussed in the previous section, English has a significant place in Thailand three main aspects. It is the language for work in this globalized age [5] as in the context of ASEAN. English is a skill essential for 21st Century, life-long learning and for communicating with people from various backgrounds. However, the lack of English skills among Thai workers and students has raised the country’s concern about Thailand’s competitiveness.

Reforming ELE is, therefore, a strategic development of Thailand to improve workforce performance, thereby improving the country’s economic performance. The direction for Thai education to **prepare graduates who are ready to enter the workforce** is due to one of the government’s “Thailand 4.0” and the 20-Year National Strategic Plan. Thailand 4.0 is informed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and has dominated the news in Thailand in the past two years. Thailand 4.0 is hoped to transform the country’s economy and society through innovation, research and high-tech industries such as logistics, robotics and digital development. The vision of the 20-Year National Strategic Plan aims to tackle the middle-income trap – “a situation in which a country’s growth slows after having reached the middle-income levels” (Languépin, 2016).

Ability in using English for everyday communication is mentioned in 12th Educational Development Plan. As such, students should be motivated to learn English for real-life communication rather than emphasizing the learning of grammar. Universities must aim at teaching “basic English communication skills” or the “working knowledge [of English]” (the Raising English standard in Thai higher education institutions policy, p. 1).

1.6. Aspiration Vs Reality

The most prevalent ELE policy direction is that Thai universities should develop curriculums that caters the country’s needs, especially in terms of human resources development and to become part of the ASEAN and world community. This direction is coherent with the government’s long-term strategies to address the country’s challenges and endorses human resources development for the ASEAN integration. Nevertheless, translating the policy aspirations into practice can be a challenging task for Thai HE.

First, there is a conflicting policy discourse in Thai HE policies related to ELE. For example, although the Raising English standard in Thai higher education institutions policy aims to promote “basic English communication skills” or “working knowledge [of English]”, it also stipulates that universities consider administering one of

standardized tests that is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) or other tests to assess students' English language proficiency [13]. This can be problematic because while universities are supposed to develop students' English competence for work, the evaluation method suggested by the OHEC is based on testing. Universities may also include the test results on students' transcripts which tends to intensify the culture of testing that has pervaded in Thai education for a long time.

Another example of policy inconsistency in Thai ELE in HE is regarding the Thailand Qualification Framework (TQF). In 2017, OHEC launched program specification for B.A. in English programs. This means that Thai universities offering such program must follow the program specification prescribed by OHEC. The program specification emphasizes the learning of linguistics, British and American literature and translation studies [13]. It has become controversial because it represents traditional English major programs and does not reflect the reality of English used as a global language in the present.

Second, there is a gap between policy and teachers' practice. A study I conducted in 2017 [13] to explore perspectives of TESOL practitioners regarding the purposes and paradigms of English language teaching revealed a gap between the top level policies and the practitioners discourses. In the study, I found that while curricular discourses (e.g. textbooks and syllabus documents) are largely coherent with the top-level policies, the main purposes of English language teaching from the teachers' perspectives remain teaching English for examination preparation (TEEP) and for academic purposes (TEAP). The teachers are committed to help students to pass exams, so a substantial class time was devoted to grammar points and students working on grammatical exercises. In addition to grammar, the teaching also associated with accuracy of written communication for academic purposes.

The teaching and learning that focus heavily on grammatical knowledge and accuracy seem to be the main reason why Thai people cannot speak English fluently despite having studied English in schools and universities for more than ten years. In line with the National Education Plan's mention of the country's English performance above, Thailand was recently ranked 64th out of 88 countries in EF English Proficiency Index 2018. In East Asia, the country's score is better than Cambodia and Myanmar, but it is far behind China and Japan [10].

The TEAP and TEEP are problematic because they emphasize on teaching "inappropriate native speaker and Anglo-centric models of English which do not reflect the growing use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) globally and particularly as the official lingua franca of ASEAN" [5].

2. SUGGESTIONS REGARDING CHANGES THAT MIGHT FACILITATE THE DIRECTION OF THE POLICIES

In order to facilitate the changes in the direction of education provided by the policies, it is crucial that policy makers ensure that current policies are aligned with each other. Second, teacher education needs to develop teachers' awareness regarding current agenda in education policy such as the ASEAN integration, 21st Century skills and the disruptive world and how all these changes have implications for education. Teachers also need support in re-orienting their teaching towards teaching English that can be used in workplaces and communicating with people from various backgrounds from ASEAN and world community.

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