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**English Education In Thailand and Singapore:
Differences in English Education, Use and Identity**

By

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and

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In order for Southeast Asia to compete on a global economic level, the ASEAN Economic Community will be formed, opening up the borders of the ten nations. This move towards achieving greater regional integration and an enhanced position on the international stage has brought increased attention on the role of English as a lingua franca and an international business language. English education is more important than ever in the region and a top priority of the ASEAN nations. The Secretary General of ASEAN asserted the importance of education and the use of English in promoting and bringing prosperity to the ASEAN nations. “Through education, through the use of English language and, more importantly, with a heightened sense of ASEAN Identity and ASEAN Community, we hope that ASEAN integration and cooperation will bring both benefits and opportunities to the region” (Le Luong Minh, 2013). Taking Thailand and Singapore into consideration, it is clear that national realities vary greatly within the region in regards to English proficiency rates. Education First’s 2013 English Proficiency Index Report revealed that Singapore was the second highest English proficiency rating of the ASEAN Nations, Coming in slightly under Malaysia in the classification “High proficiency”. Comparatively, Thailand ranked 55th out of 60 countries rated, falling into the “Very Low Proficiency” category. Critiques of Thailand’s low rankings tend to be blamed

on a weak English education system. While this is indeed an imperative factor, to understand other factors it is important to consider the other two areas in questions: Use and Identity. These three core factors can be applied specifically to the regional goal of improving English proficiency and understanding the difficulty of creating regional policies. This study will show the relationship between English proficiency and student sentiments on education, opportunity for use, and identity.

Education

When analyzing English proficiency rates the first thing considered is the English education system in place. Because English entered Southeast Asia through the divisive means of colonialism, a historical understanding of English in Thailand and Singapore is an important detail. First a brief historical overview of the English education in each country will be provided. Subsequently an analysis of current issues that Singapore and Thailand face independently as well as shared critiques. A comparison will then be drawn between the current states of English education by examining student attitudes towards the effectiveness of the language education system. While satisfaction levels and realities in the classroom are very different, there are some similar take aways in both countries regarding what changes students would like to see in the approach to English education as it progresses.

English was first introduced to Thailand during the rule of King Rama III beginning in 1824. The language was initially taught to diplomats while formal education of the language was limited to royalty and elite classes. 1921 marked the first time English became a required area of study for students beginning at grade 5.

The dominance of English as the leading foreign language in Thailand gained momentum in the 1940s and 1950s with two noticeable shifts. Thailand's nationalist government strove to promote the Thai language above other languages in the area and ensured its predominance by closing hundreds of Chinese and Malay medium schools. This combined with the increasing influence of America and the amount of foreign aid from English-speaking countries led to English becoming incorporated as the dominant foreign language in the national curricula. In 2010 the Ministry of Education in Thailand proposed to declare English as a national language with the goal of promoting bilingual education. This plan sought to import thousands of native English speakers and employ immersion tactics to promote greater adoption of English. This was met with reluctance from both the government and educational authorities alike. This proposal was immediately withdrawn as there were concerns that the establishment of English as an official language "could lead to misunderstandings that Thailand had once been colonized in the past" (Bunnag, 2010). The response this policy proposal suggested highlights two most influential factors in the determination of language policy in Thailand. Considerations of language are nationalistic in nature and predominately controlled by the education branch of the government (Darasawang & Todd, 2012, p 208). While there are limited official documents on language policy, the ones that do exist are education centric. In these documents, Thai dominates for reasons of national security and racial integration with English being the only foreign language specified as useful for information dissemination (Darasawang & Todd, 2012).

In Singapore, English played a much more important role in creating cross cultural harmony and understanding while also taking into consideration economic, educational, and political concerns. Singapore was under British influence beginning in 1824 and did not become a fully self-governing entity until 1959, having a profound effect on English in the society (Leinbach, n.d.). Malay was established as the national language, in celebration of the nations cultural heritage, but English was not denounced as the language of the oppressors for long. In 1955 the Singapore government initiated *the Report of the All-Party Committee of the Singapore Legislative Assembly on Chinese Education* with the initial intent of improving the Chinese education system. This spurred the introduction of English as a unifying language as “although many post-colonial countries abandoned the language of the colonizers upon independence, the All-Party Report emphasized the potential use of English for inter-ethnic communication as well as for commerce and trade with other countries” (Silver, Hu et al., 2002). This report began the eventual shift to a bilingual education system with Mother Tongue languages being a required subject in primary and secondary school while English became the language of instruction.

Current concern surrounding English education in Thailand and Singapore relates to the in classroom approach. In both countries, the most popular approach being advocated for by scholars and professors has been Communicative Language Learning or CLT. This approach strives to move away from the traditional grammar-based reaching approach and towards enhancing students abilities to actually communicate in the language (Vongxay, 2013). Another scholar in ASEAN English

education supports moving away from traditional second language acquisition which strives to produce native-like pronunciation and command of the language (Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012). What these have in common is the idea that students need to be learning how to communicate in the language rather than attempting to achieve western English standards. While these suggested approaches are plausible solutions for addressing the English needs of ASEAN and have proven learner benefits, actual implementation can be quite challenging as seen with the attempts in both Thailand and Singapore. Challenges experienced in both countries vary significantly, however the core theme throughout both countries has to do with the structure of the education system as a whole, shedding light on why these student-centered approaches can be arduous to apply to Asian contexts in general. Despite the numerous differences in approach, resources, and results, students in both countries share the desire to move away from a book and test-centered approach. This critique was often shared about education in general, but was seen as being particularly connected with issues in English education.

In Thailand CLT is a popular phrase used by English teachers and ministry officials alike. As a secondary English teacher in Thailand I was required attend CLT conferences, during which a clear understanding of how CLT is applied in the classroom was never given. The challenge is not in selecting the appropriate teaching technique, but in the actual implementation in the classroom. A 2012 study addressing CLT challenges in Thailand revealed 18 issues attributing to the disconnect between theory and practice to in the Thai English classroom context. Among the most significant are students being uncomfortable with CLT activities,

large class sizes, lack of training for teachers, and an exam system that does not incorporate CLT objectives (Islam & Shafaat Bari, 2012). All of these problems were experienced first hand when teaching an “English for Communication” class at a secondary school in Thailand. Students were trained to copy whatever what is put on the board and not question the teacher. Shifting from a teacher-centered classroom to one that requires the students to be more actively involved can be uncomfortable both sides and is not a change that can occur over a short period of time. The teachers I interacted with were very comfortable with the traditional approach to teaching English through grammar and repetition. Also important to consider is the lack of resources, both capital and knowledge based. A lack of funds causes class sizes to be too large to effectively integrate communication-based exercises. Because there is a shortage of English teachers, at the primary and secondary levels English teachers are required to have a Bachelors degree, but it does not need to be English specific. Many English professors related these issues to a lack of understand “I’ve been teaching in Thailand for over 20 years and the positive changes are minimal and very slow because people in top positions don't appear to understand what English teachers need to teach.” He also addressed the lack of substance in incorporating a more learner centered approach, “It’s still the antiquated grammar first system buzzwords like learner centered has averted the vocabulary but nobody up top seems to know what it means or what it looks like or how you do it and there is still minimal or zero framing of Thai teachers to teach English” (Payap 3).

Despite efforts of the Ministry of Education to promote the use of CLT techniques, student responses reveal that a noticeable shift has not occurred in the education system. One English major spoke to this issue when she was asked about the issues she experienced with English education, “They teach grammar, grammar, grammar, but we don’t know even what it is, we don’t know how we can use. In the real life it is not like this. Many Thai teachers only teach what they have been told by the curriculum” (University Student, SN). Another student supported the idea that the grammar based curriculum was damaging not only because it did not provide them with the tools to communicate but also because they tend to worry so much about using perfect grammar they fear making a mistake. “I’m not confident in speaking. I like writing more. Most teachers teach a lot of grammar to students so the students cannot practice with a foreigner because we worry to much about grammar” (SN Student).

This was a common feeling felt at all three schools, even the universities in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, known for attracting a large amount of tourists. “ My friends they are afraid to get wrong, when they talk and they say something wrong or sometimes they don’t understand everything for example, maybe you ask them or directions and they understand everything but they cannot use the words to put it out in the conversation. Sometimes they can write it down, they can say turn right, and turn left but they cannot put all the words into a big sentence” (Payap, Nikki). A student in Bangkok described it as being “Stuck in the mouth”. While there are

students knowledgeable about English grammar, it will not help them when needing to use the language for cross-cultural communication.

In Singapore, however, students feel they have almost the opposite problem as result of the shift to a more communicative approach. Even though Singapore's education system has been effective in creating a society of proficient English speakers, students still find issues with the treatment of the language. While fluency in the language is not considered to be an issue at all, students and professors have noticed two major faults in the move towards a more communicative approach: A lack of focus on grammar and the inability for students to express themselves in the language. When asked about what changes should be made to English education in Singapore a student responded, "The very first is to place an emphasis on grammar and structure because I realize in the school went to there is a lot of emphasis on composition and comprehension ... they place too much emphasis on those and they don't really focus on our foundational English" (STUDENT SMU). Another student mirrored this claim in his statement, "I find that the correct grammar isn't really being instilled in us...When our teachers mark the papers they don't identify, they do underline, but they don't tell you what the fault is" she felt that in order to correct these mistakes teachers should not only give feedback on content but "also the language itself because I find that it is very difficult for me to improve my language" (SMU).

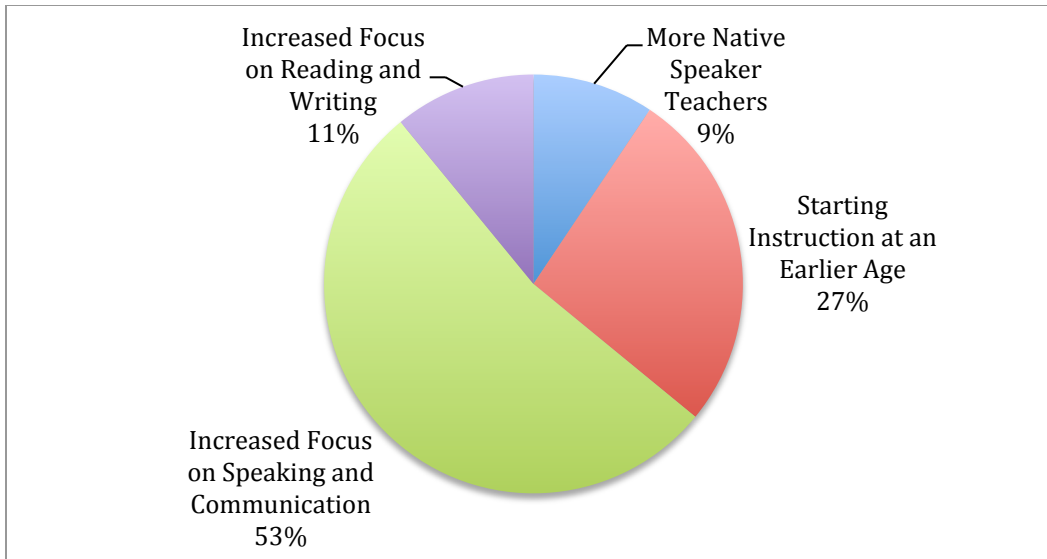
Shifting away from traditional grammar-focused teaching and towards an emphasis on communication does not come entirely without side effects especially

considering the contexts in which the language is used. In Thailand, it may make more sense for students to be able to effectively communicate their ideas without having a sophisticated understanding of grammar under the assumption that it is being used as a lingua franca. In Singapore the context is changing in a way that it may be increasingly detrimental to English speakers to not have a strong grasp of English grammar. For younger generations English is now serving as a first language for many and is no longer being learned to simply communicate cross culturally as previously utilized. This shift is noticeable in the concern that students are unable to express themselves fully in the language. This is not as concerning of an issue if it is merely being used as a lingua franca, but there are students in Singapore who consider English to be their first language while feeling they cannot be as articulate and expressive as they would like to be. A university student who admitted English was his first language and that he can speak only basic of his mother-tongue language stated, "I still do struggle to express myself in English because we weren't given that opportunity to stand up and say well I disagree, well I agree. We didn't have that when we were younger...you know, these are the opinions just accept it. So we don't know how to use language to do that, we don't know how to use language to express yourself, however we can use language to memorize something" (NIE). Another student offered support for this notion in their assertion that, "we don't see the language as a form of communication, as a form to express ourselves, we see it more as a tool. Something we can do well in. I guess in a sense English is in a way, diluted to something less beautiful" (NIE STUDENT). Even with the shifted focus away from grammar, certain similarities still persist between Thailand and

Singapore and the previously mentioned issues with implementing CLT techniques in an Asian context. Despite having teachers highly proficient in English, greater financial resources, and a more rigorous education system overall, the issue of rote learning is still present in the Singapore classroom. A professor from a university in Singapore addressed this issue of achieving meaningful change; “I think they are having a problem right now because they are trying to slowly move away from rote learning which is just all memorizing the right answer, memorizing from the textbook. That’s one thing about Singaporean students; as well they don’t really try to understand what’s happening. They don’t dare to ask questions because they are afraid of looking stupid or give the wrong answer. I got side tracked. They are trying to move away from that kind of learning method but I feel like the current way of education is so ingrained in society (SMU).

Exhibit 1: Most common First choice response to “What changes in the approach to English education do you see as being most effective? (Rank in order of importance 1-4 with 1 being most important”

a. Thailand



b. Singapore

Survey responses showed some similarities between what students in Thailand and Singapore saw as being most important to emphasis for English education policies moving forward. In both countries the top two responses were a need or an increased focus on speaking and communication and starting instruction at an earlier age. In both countries the least common response was a need for more native speakers. Two data points are significant in contrasting with some theories of English education scholars particularly the issue of starting English at an earlier age. It has been argued that that beginning English instruction at a younger age would actually detrimental both to acquisition of one's mother tongue language but also to their command of English, producing a situation in which speakers are weak in multiple languages. Kirkpatrick proposes that “the language learning focus of the

ASEAN primary school should be on local languages, and that the teaching of English can be delayed” In order to combat the negatives of this “myth” of English education, three principles are proposed. The first principle states, “Delay the introduction of English until child has literacy in the L1 and until conditions and facilities merit it” (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This model strives to address development issue in children while also ensuring the relevance of a nation’s national language in a world where English is increasingly receiving the emphasis. Another statistic that shows how student priorities differ with decision makers can be seen with the low responses in Thailand for increased Native Speakers. In 2010 the Minister of Education declared that thousands of native-speaker English teachers would be imported in an attempt to address the issues in English education (Peterson, n.d.). While this may seem like a quick fix to address the absence of English teachers fluent in English, this only drains resources that should be allocated towards proper teacher trainings to develop the language and teaching skills of Thai teachers. No teaching experience or education is required by most primary and secondary schools in Thailand. Fluency in a language does not improve the standard of education and in many cases can actually compromise it. From these results students place a higher value in a classroom that provides them with communication skills over having a native speaker in the classroom.

Use

While English Education provides the foundation of language skills, acquiring fluency or even competency in another language requires use and practice on a

regular basis. The way and frequency in which language is used in Thailand compared to in Singapore is significant in contributing the English proficiency gap. There is a very different level of motivation required to have English incorporated into ones daily life. In Thailand students have to seek out the opportunity to practice their English and make it a priority by actively choosing to engage with people and content in English. The widespread use of English in Singapore requires that students use English to interact with other on a daily basis.

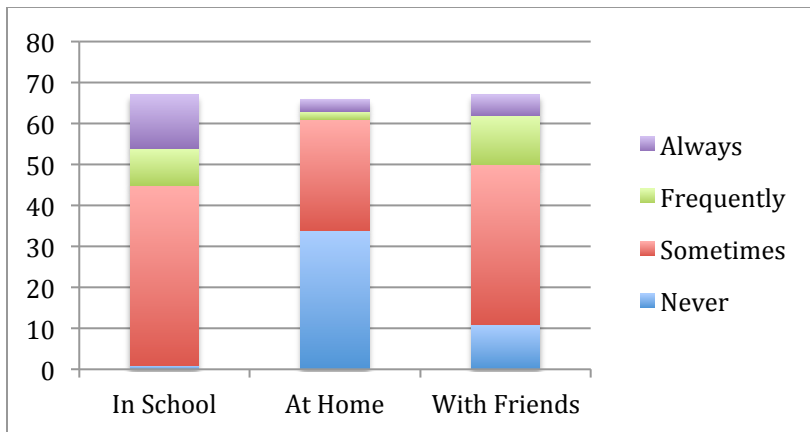
In Thailand the greatest challenge is a lack of opportunities to speak English, especially for students living outside of major tourist areas and for those not attending international schools. Because Thailand is a hegemonic society with Thai nationals making up 75% of the population (“Thailand,” n.d.). Thai has its own national language, citizens do not have to use English in their daily lives to survive and communicate with the general masses. This places an even greater importance on the classroom and its role of providing students with an environment that not only allows them to speak English but also forces them to do so. Students have a fear of speaking out, especially in English because they are afraid of making a mistake. This fear is supplemented by the fact that in many classes students are not encouraged to challenge the teacher or this approach to language education makes it very difficult to attain fluency on any level as students are rarely given the opportunity to speak out in the language or use it organically. In Thailand students highly proficient in English said they were able to reach their level of proficiency by watching English movies, listening to English music, and talking to foreigners. While there is access to these resources, students must make the decision on a personal

level to allocate their time to practicing the language outside of school. When Thai students were asked how they used English in their daily lives outside of their English classes, the responses were always when watching movies, listening to music and talking to foreign friends (often through social media). These activities require students to make the active decision to participate in an English based activity out of their own interest in improving their skills or because they have an interest in English speaking cultures. A total of 68 students responded to the survey question, "How often do you use English in each area?" and were asked to indicate their level of English use At home, at school, and with friends. Respondents, 68 in total, were from three universities in Thailand and currently studying English. "Sometimes" was the most common response for the school and with friends categories. In response to their usage at home, 50% of the surveyed students said it was never used and 40% said it was sometimes used at home. The three students who said it was always used attended an international school wherein English was the language of instruction for all subjects. The majority of students who attend international institutions have either lived abroad in an English speaking country, or have attending international schools for their primary and secondary education as well. When discussing why she thought English proficiency was low, a University student in Bangkok stated, "you learn English but we don't have a chance to use it. We only learn it two hours in a week. Just only in the class we never get a chance to use it outside of class". (Student # (PAYAP).

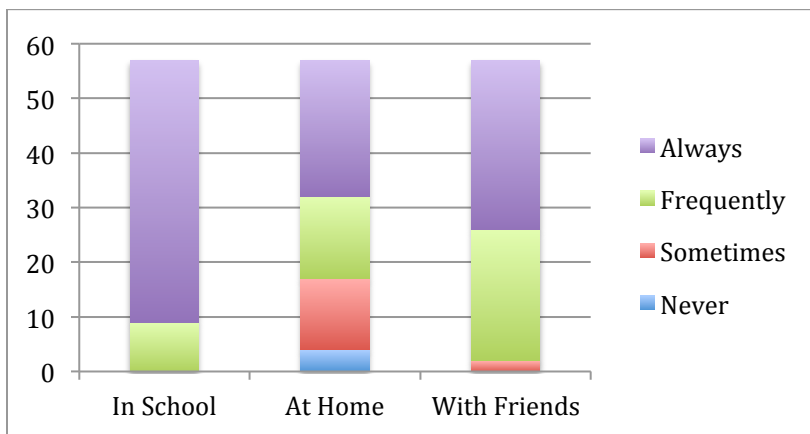
In Singapore the use of English is not a choice but a necessity in most aspects of their lives. Singapore has more widely established minority populations. 74.2% of the population is Chinese, 13.3% is Malay, and 9.2% is Chinese (“Singapore Demographics Profile 2014,” 2014). While Chinese is the dominant ethnic group, the mother tongue education system places the same value on Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay treating all languages as being supplemental to English. English is the language of education in the public school systems and is the lingua franca between the different ethnicities that makeup the Singaporean population. When I would ask students about what motivated them to learn English, they said it wasn’t really something they thought about doing or not doing, it was just their language and a requirement in school. The English centric culture allows students to experience the language outside the classroom in a way that is not available on the same level in Thailand. This opportunity for use is exemplified in the survey data collected at three universities in Singapore amongst 57 respondents. Exhibit??? Shows that the most common responses for all three domains are either always or frequently. The only area that some students state they never used English was in the home, but always was still the most common response. This data shows that English is pervasive in all aspects of their lives, on a much more apparent scale than seen with the data from Thailand.

Exhibit 2: “How often do you use English in each area?”

Thailand



Singapore



Identity

The third component mentioned by the ASEAN secretary general is identity. While this identity was referring to one on an ASEAN level, it is significant to consider how the issue of identity may influence English proficiency levels in Thailand and Singapore. There are many different layers of identity that should be considered in analyzing the impact on English acquisition. Before an ASEAN identity

can be established it is important to analyze the differing ways in which identity and English are working together in the two ASEAN countries selected. This issue of identity has a profound effect on how students approach a language in terms of attitude and motivation for learning. The Thai dominated culture allows citizens to live in the country without having to rely on any other language. Despite the strong sense of appreciation for Thai culture, university students are beginning to realize that appreciation of Thai culture can exist with increased importance on learning English. Singapore in contrast is seeing a generational shift in linguistic identity as younger generations begin to identify more with English than their mother-tongue language. The relationship between the English language and identity in learners of the language is particularly interesting in Thailand and Singapore considering the differing roles it has played in the historical roots of the respective countries as previously examined. Understanding the historical relationship of English and the individual compared to how students relate to the language today is imperative when considering the treatment of English education in the classroom.

While it is important for governments to make English a national priority, economic and political motivations at the national level are not enough to improve English language learning results. Ultimately it is the value students place on learning English that will drive their time spent. Student attitudes towards English show influence from both national and international factors. A Thai centered education system has caused many students to view English as a mandatory subject they must study, but not as a necessary skill. Many students expressed the sentiment that they are Thai and therefore only need to know Thai, the common

belief of older generations. This attitude is changing amongst the younger generations as students realize the benefits of learning English to use it and not just to pass a test.

Unlike any other country in the ASEAN bloc, Thailand was never colonized by a western power. This has been significant in not only affecting how English was introduced to the society but also how the nation views the language. There is a sense of pride in Thailand's history of warding off colonization and has created a strong sense of national identity shaped over many years and continues to be instilled in the country's citizens. This is significant to English education in that the education system as a whole is created on a foundation of Thai nationality, limiting the attention paid to English as a part of the education system as a whole. While English is a required second language it is not needed to fulfill the main objective of the curriculum, which strives to preserve a sense of 'Thainess'.

This appreciation for their history and culture is seen in the public school curriculum as shown by the first principle in the most recent Basic Education Core Curriculum for government secondary schools, "1. The ultimate aim is attainment of national unity; learning standards and goals are therefore set with a view of enabling the children and youths to acquire knowledge, skills, attitude and morality to serve as a foundation for Thai-ness and universal values" (Ministry of Education, Thailand). The curriculum also puts in order the 8 learning areas with the first area being Thailand Language and the last priority being Foreign Languages. While

English is the preferred foreign language and is required beginning in primary school, the curriculum places a much higher priority on Thai language, culture, history, and all other classes not conducted in English. Out of 8 'Desirable Characteristics' the first is "Love of nation, religion, and king" further showing the Thai-focused vision of the curriculum. English is not necessary in the creation of a Thai identity because it is a homogenous society that shares a national language.

English serves to unite the large variety of ethnicities living in Singapore. Since its founding Singapore has had to develop language policies that took this linguistic variety into account. While they will be using English to communicate with members of other ASEAN countries, this does not serve as the predominant function of the language and is maybe why the curriculum isn't as ASEAN centered as seen in Thailand. When asked what the barriers would be if they were to work in another ASEAN country the reply was always in reference to a language barrier, as they didn't speak Thai or Vietnamese and not all areas of these countries speak English fluently.

English has become so dominant in the culture that when students were presented with the survey question "what is your native language?" 33 out of 57 students stated English was their native language. 22 students responded with a mother tongue language and 2 students said they considered English and their mother tongue language to be equal. The government and students alike acknowledge that English is being appreciated as more important than mother-tongue languages. "The government has recently recognized that the bilingual policy has not been the success it had hoped for and called for a review of the teaching of

the four languages, namely, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil” English in ASEAN: implications for regional multilingualism) 335. Most students admitted that the declination of mother tongue use and the even more rapid loss of dialects, they did not think English dominance in Singapore was negative. Even after

While students see the value in maintaining mother tongue languages for cultural reasons, they also assert the practicality of using English. The shift from a stronger identity with a mother tongue language compared to identifying with English as a first language can be seen within families. Many students revealed that because their mother tongue language was weak, communication with their own grandparents is limited. When asked if the disconnect between her generation and her grandparent’s generation a SMU student replied, “Yes, because I mean they’re my own grandparents I can’t really converse with them. Of course it does bother me especially since they are getting older and older I would definitely like to be able to speak with them and have them express like how they feel. “The older generation is now living in a society that is English, a language that most were never formally educated in. The drastic shift has created a communication gap between generations. A student shared the experience of his grandfather’s attempt to adapt, “He is taking English classes because he drives on the road and all the signs are in English so in a way he is forced to learn English. And he also finds that there is a need to because all the letters he sends are mainly in English so he would always need to depend on us to read for him so he is trying to pick up the key terms and try to read it himself now days”. This will be less of an issue moving forward as the generation in between, the parents of today’s university students, can speak English at a much higher rate.

While this means that generations will once again be able to communicate this also paints a bleak future for the future of dialects.

The government has run campaigns to move people away from dialects with their “Speak Mandarin campaign” which strove to unite the Chinese population in Singapore. It was feared that the continued use of dialects would factionalize the Chinese community. This has created the gap as the older generations speak dialects. While some attempt to learn English to connect with their grandchildren, others turn to Mandarin. “If you look at Southeast Asia in a smaller context, if you look at Thailand their main language is Thai then you look at Malaysia, their first language is Malay, before English...because their language focus in on their national language. For us our national language is Malay but it’s actually English because everyone speaks English and I think for the rest of the country they can’t really be faulted for it...they can’t really be focusing on English language as much because they probably have to be their national language first. And for us because we come from so many different backgrounds we can’t really fix a language as a national language” (Student, NIE).

Conclusion

The actual teaching of the language itself, while ultimately creating the foundation, is not the only important factor when considering why English proficiency levels differ drastically amongst nations within the ASEAN region. If

English education is going to be considered a policy priority at an ASEAN level, national contexts must be considered. Merely applying English techniques and practices that are succeeding. Singapore's government and as result its public education system has advantages of capital, size, and quality over that of Thailand's. The education system alone is not what has created the disparity in English.

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