The Status of 'English as a Foreign Language' in East Asian Countries: A Second Language Teacher's Perspective[1]

Mark R. Freiermuth
Swinburne University of Technology-Sarawak

Abstract

This research note consists of a literature review of English language policy and its usage for selected East Asian countries, with some experience-based comments added to bolster and highlight the prevalence of English and the English language goals of the countries in question. Specifically, we intend to discuss the development of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in the countries of Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia. The governments of these countries have declared the importance of the English language, have committed significant resources to enhance English education and have developed policies to achieve their societal English language learning goals. Nevertheless, as this article will point out, there is often a wide gap between the stated policy goals and the implementation in the education sector, which subsequently harms businesses that are hoping to internationalize their companies. The conclusion promoted in this survey is that real fears hamper the development of English language advancements. These fears take shape due to a lack of a deep understanding of just how difficult it is to implement government policies at the local level. Consequently, governments need to invest more time and resources in training teachers, in developing rural areas and in helping businesses that want to internationalize. Of course, there are many tough decisions that need to be made along the way, but with a committed and concerted effort, each country can make progress towards achieving its goals.

Cette note de recherche présente une revue de la littérature des politiques linguistiques liées à l'usage de l'anglais dans certains pays d'Asie de l'Est, à laquelle s'ajoutent quelques observations fondées sur notre expérience afin de mettre en évidence la prévalence de l'anglais et les objectifs linguistiques de ces pays. Plus précisément, nous abordons le développement de l'anglais langue étrangère (EFL) au Japon, à Taïwan, au Viêt Nam, en Thaïlande et en Indonésie. Les gouvernements de ces pays ont reconnu l'importance de la langue anglaise, ont consacré d'importantes ressources à l'amélioration de l'enseignement de l'anglais et ont élaboré des politiques visant à atteindre leurs objectifs nationaux d'apprentissage de l'anglais. Néanmoins, comme le montre cette note, il existe souvent un écart considérable entre les objectifs déclarés de ces politiques et leur mise en œuvre dans le secteur éducatif, ce qui nuit par la suite aux entreprises souhaitant internationaliser leurs activités. La conclusion tirée de cette étude est que de véritables craintes entravent le progrès de la maîtrise de l'anglais. Ces craintes découlent d'un manque de compréhension profonde des difficultés réelles liées à la mise en œuvre des politiques gouvernementales au niveau local. Par conséquent, les gouvernements doivent investir davantage de temps et de ressources dans la formation des enseignants, le développement des zones rurales et le soutien aux entreprises désireuses de s'internationaliser. Bien entendu, de nombreuses décisions difficiles doivent être prises en cours de route, mais avec un engagement soutenu et concerté, chaque pays peut progresser vers la réalisation de ses objectifs linguistiques.

Keywords

English language policy, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Urban-rural divide, teacher training, bilingualism, English language curriculum, best practices
Politique linguistique de l'anglais, Anglais langue étrangère, Disparité entre zones urbaines et rurales, Formation des enseignants, Bilinguisme, Programme d'étude en langue anglaise, Bonnes pratiques

This research note is aimed at uncovering how particular East Asian countries manage English language learning looking at government policy, implementation in the education sector and business. In other words, this is not a research article per se; rather it is a teacher's perspective based on a compilation of local materials and experiences. By gaining a better understanding of these interacting elements, we have extracted the most up-to-date content on EFL learning in selected Asian countries which have 'committed' themselves to advancing the English

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capabilities of their populations. It is hoped that this paper will shed a thread of light on what might be done to overcome some of the hurdles that these countries face.

Generally speaking, as English is important to all Asian countries, it is necessary to restrict the focus so that the discussion becomes somewhat more manageable. As such, we consider four questions to narrow the topic (Choi et al. 2024; Graddol 2006; Patel et al. 2023; Simpson 2011).

1. Which Asia do we mean? Here we focus primarily on East Asia.
2. Are they truly EFL (English as a Foreign Language) countries? Here we focus on only those countries considered to be EFL countries—excluding any countries where English has become a lingua franca.
3. Have they achieved a reasonable level of success? South Korea and China have achieved some of their goals based on standardized testing, so we have decided to focus on other countries instead.
4. Do I have any firsthand knowledge of the countries' EFL usage? If I have neither visited the country nor experienced a language class in action, I opt not to discuss the country here; hence, Cambodia will not be looked at here.
5. There are sufficient research materials available to piece together an overview for that country.

With that list whittled down, I have chosen to focus on the EFL (English as a foreign language) countries of Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia (Choi et al. 2024; Patel et al. 2023). We will look at each of these countries in some detail so as to paint an appropriate picture of the state of English language learning in the country under the microscope.

Japan

Japan's changing views regarding English language learning can be logically tied to the global marketplace. On my way back to Japan, I recall chatting with a well-dressed Japanese man in his mid-30s about their business in Jakarta. The company had conducted business in English with their Indonesian partners, but the young man confessed that he had needed to attend private English lessons on a nightly basis after he graduated from university to bring his skills up to the appropriate level for business communication. He regretted not studying English more seriously in university.

His reflections do point to an actual problem. TOEIC scores do indicate a certain ability in listening and reading in English, and TOEIC has complemented that with a speaking and writing test for a more well-rounded assessment program. TOEIC is promoted at many universities and is used as a standard measurement that businesses have long relied on to assess English abilities when hiring new employees (Shimomura 2016). However, although the TOEIC format aligns with the stated goals of both businesses and the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), actual educational practices do not reflect the stated objectives.

From the educational side, there has been a strong push promoting learning English with the specific aim of passing through 'gates' along the way. English language learning generally starts informally in elementary school; however, as students consider entering junior high school, they are faced with the rigors of passing formalized tests; high school exams are the next hurdle, and the biggest hurdle of all are the national university entrance exams. English is assessed at each gateway.

Due to these standardized-type tests, the general focus of English education is aimed at increasing students' English vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, while simultaneously improving their reading abilities and listening skills. Students and teachers often feel overwhelmed and consequently become fixated on meeting the test demands in response to the push from MEXT to have their students do well on the national tests (Uematsu et al. 2024).

Inevitably, English ends up being taught as simply an additional academic subject or a necessary but irritating roadblock rather than a valuable tool that can be used for international

communication. When English language learning students see little value in learning English for the purposes of using it, they tend to lose motivation (Freiermuth and Huang 2012; 2015a; 2015b; Freiermuth and Kanaya under review). As an example, when international communication majors were given an informal survey reflecting on learning English in junior and senior high school, their answers consistently pointed to the problem of motivation. In particular, they mentioned that the following types of English language teaching practices proved very discouraging:

1. The teacher only focuses on the next big exam, concentrating on grammar and test examples.
2. The teacher only uses Japanese except when using the 'example' sentence or word.
3. The teacher is rigid and demanding rather than kind and patient.
4. The teacher never talks about his or her own language learning experiences.

Although these practices seem to run counter to MEXT's official policy, apparently, it is much more difficult to manage in the actual classroom setting. Hence, the test-makers and teachers fall back on outdated practices to achieve the actual goals.

Turning to the government, on paper, they do support the internationalization of Japan through the learning of communicative English. Their official English policy taken from a MEXT (6) report states: "Gaining overseas experience at an impressionable age allows one to interact with people of diverse cultures and backgrounds, to expand one's view and to deepen one's insight, which is important for the cultivation of human resources able to play an active role in the global community." The educational and business sectors would tend to agree with this statement; how to achieve these aims is another matter entirely (Uematsu et al. 2024).

One of the problems alluded to in the aforementioned informal survey is that Japanese English teachers do not always adhere to the policy guidelines (such as teaching in English and focusing on communication) simply because they often feel overwhelmed or incapable due to the requirements (Uematsu et al. 2024). With that said, as working English teachers, they were able to take and pass the required English language examinations (often paper-based) to become English teachers. My point is that passing through these exam 'gates' does not equate with being competent English communicators at the international level or even good teachers at all. The problem seems to be related to how English is actually viewed. For example, Japanese developers of a proposed benchmark assessment—created to judge the capabilities of Japanese English language teachers—were shocked when confronted by strong opinions from invited outside assessors from Hong Kong, who rejected outright three out of the eight videotaped English language teachers' lessons. In their own words, the Japanese English teachers being assessed were simply 'unbenchmarkable' due to poor and often incomprehensible pronunciation. In addition, these outside assessors also criticized the teaching style of some of the English teachers for not attending to needed corrections of their Japanese students. Thus, despite being 'qualified,' the teachers were not able to teach English at an acceptable standard according to these experts (Nakata et al. 2018). The upshot is that MEXT needs to find ways beyond issuing noble edicts from above to address the needs of secondary school English teachers. If the ultimate goal is improving the English communication skills of students, better assessment measures of English teachers is a must, which will entail proper preparation at the university level as well.

Taking matters into their own hands, some businesses have instituted an 'English only' policy in the workplace, but the results have been mixed. The retailer Rakuten is a good example. They implemented an 'English only' policy in 2012, which was a dramatic move for a Japanese business. However, since that time, they have slowly backpedaled on that decision, opting for a case-by-case approach. Their policy now is: when English is needed, please use English, and when Japanese is needed, please use Japanese. Even though average TOEIC scores have risen from 526 in 2010 to a fairly lofty 830 at Rakuten, they have also lost many experienced managers who thought it better to take their careers elsewhere rather than struggle to use English

on a day-to-day basis. Honda Motor and Shiseido Cosmetics have taken a similarly moderate approach. Nevertheless, as such companies expand internationally, they are in practical terms encountering an endemic problem in Japan that has hindered English language capabilities for years, namely, no opportunities to use English for practical communication (Houghton et al. 2019).

As of 2017, average TOEIC scores in Japan, at 517, were comparatively low when measured against their immediate neighbors South Korea and China, boasting averages of 676 and 600, respectively. Nevertheless, the atmosphere is getting a bit brighter as of late for businesses. Tryon, an English language training provider for business, has claimed that the number of workers under the age of 30 who reach 600 on TOEIC is double the number of those in their 40s, indicating that perhaps the increased focus on English in secondary and tertiary education may be slowly paying off. With that said, Japan has a long hard road ahead if it wishes to be on the cutting-edge of international business (Matsui et al. 2018).

Having lived 24 years in Japan, I have seen many of the ups and downs in English education and in business. If I had to sum up advice to Japan, I would say, 'To satisfy the needs of the business community, please incorporate English for communication in the classrooms and encourage Japanese English teachers to study overseas in an English-speaking country for one year by offering them financial incentives to do so.' Such moves would show true commitment rather than lip service to the English policies laid out by MEXT, and I think this would go a long way towards turning the corner.

Taiwan

There was a large gap in time between the first time I visited Taiwan and my most recent trip. Communication skills in English have risen dramatically, especially among recent graduates from university. This was quite apparent when purchasing goods and services outside of the hotel. Like Japan, there is a generally positive feeling about English. One pervasive example is that many Taiwanese have adopted English names. One might think this is only to help foreign folks who cannot pronounce their Chinese names, but it is much deeper than that. My colleagues never hesitate to use the English language names of friends and family members whenever a foreigner, like myself, is around. In a very real sense, many Taiwanese people have two names. This is just to point out that English is important to the Taiwanese. In fact in 2006, 80% of respondents to a survey said they wanted the government to designate English as the official second language in Taiwan (Graddol 2006).

This commitment to English is unwavering since those early days, and the government is not slacking towards implementing policies aimed at moving society towards speaking English better, as pointed out here by Patel et al. (97).

Taiwan has implemented a policy to become bilingual in Chinese and English by 2030. As part of this commitment, English will become a compulsory subject in the school curriculum, and ambitious targets will be set to see improved results.

With that said, in academia, Taiwan—like Japan—has long focused on the testing and assessment of receptive skills, which act as 'gates' in secondary and tertiary education. Naturally, test washback has relegated productive skills to second in the order of importance (Patel et al. 2023). Taiwan seems to be acutely aware of the tension between implementing the bilingual communication policy and the test-taking system in place. Despite the bilingual policy, universities and high schools continue to use receptive skills tests for entrance examinations. On the one hand, just like the situation in Japan, this testing-taking element is a cultural issue rather than an educational issue and as such, it is deemed as being very important to many Taiwanese. On the other hand, it hinders the aims of becoming a society with more competent speakers of English (Eliassen 2021).

One additional hurdle for academia is that the 'English atmosphere' is starkly different when comparing urban and rural settings. Those rural areas have few incentives to use English because there are limited opportunities, and privately developed resources, such as English-focused 'buxiban' (cram) schools are considered to be too expensive by many parents (Eliassen 2021). The government has attempted to address this issue by promoting the use of internet resources in English to help bridge the urban-rural divide, but implementation without direction facilitates various problems (Freiermuth and Huang 2012; 2015a; 2015b; National Development Council 2021). The jury is still out on the ambitious English goals of Taiwan. Will it be a success story? If the whole educational system can shift towards the goals of bilingualism (à la Singapore), it could be very effective over the long term (Eliassen 2021).

In spite of the tension between institutions and policy, the government continues to push forward with its bilingual goals. One significant hurdle is that many students lack motivation to study English, and because of the policies, students end up spending an enormous amount of time studying English, which takes time away from their study of other subjects and even other languages including Mandarin Chinese—which is mandatory—and Minnanese (Taiwanese), which most Taiwanese speak and hope to preserve; in addition, some citizens speak Hakka and some others, aboriginal languages. In other words, it is difficult to keep a proper balance all of the competing goals when English language learning becomes the focal point (Chien et al. 2013).

Clearly, the impetus behind the bilingual policy is aimed ultimately at Taiwan's ability to conduct business on an international scale with a minimum of difficulties. The government's own report emphasizes this ideal (National Development Council 2021:5).

> By forging a bilingual 2030 and attracting international enterprises to invest and set up operations in Taiwan, and by enabling domestic enterprises with bilingual capabilities to connect to the world, international business opportunities can be expanded for domestic enterprises and high-quality job opportunities can be created for Taiwanese citizens.

Nevertheless, 2030 is fast approaching, and if the academic sector and the government cannot effectively synchronize their objectives, this will be quite difficult to achieve. As it stands at the moment, the English language skills of many Taiwanese businessmen and businesswomen are not at a proper level to conduct international business effectively (Hsu 2021).

If I had offer advice to Taiwan, I would say: 'Despite the likelihood of not reaching your objectives on time, keep the aims of bilingualism by 2030 despite the negative feedback; simultaneously hold the gatekeepers in academia accountable by insisting on the development of more communicative tests that are in line with the government's policies.' Connecting policy to academia would be a great first step.

Vietnam

In a professional sense, I have been to Vietnam twice. The first time was in 2008 and the second was in 2024. The skill improvement of English and its pervasiveness on urban streets, although anecdotal, were eye-opening.

To say Vietnam has been playing the long game is an understatement. In 1986, the Vietnamese government introduced the Đổi Mới Policy aimed at the internationalization of Vietnamese society via the opening up of markets to the outside world; English was naturally a core component (Ngo and Tran 2024). The fruits of this policy are now being reaped as the Vietnamese economy has become one of the steadiest in all of Asia, and the poverty rate's steady decrease is a palpable outward sign. As a signpost, the poverty level, which is now at

under 5% of the population, was well over 50% a mere 32 years back (Baum 2019). The influence of English has become widespread to the point that most job advertisements now include a requirement stating that potential employees must possess 'good' levels of English to perform their duties effectively (Freiermuth and Kanaya, under review).

Thus, English has become Vietnam's *go-to* language for international communication, creating a welcoming environment for large businesses looking to Vietnam as a place to set up shop (Nghia and Vu 2024). Practically, this has also meant that other Asian EFL countries dealing with their own struggles to raise the level of English for business purposes must find a way to do so in order to compete. In a somewhat odd twist, this has led to small private English schools popping up in big cities in Vietnam—not for Vietnamese English language learners but for foreigners conducting business in Vietnam. For example, in Ho Chi Minh City there are now English schools for Japanese workers being taught by Japanese English teachers who are residing in Vietnam (Freiermuth and Kanaya under review).

Concerning English education, to get to the place where Vietnam finds itself today, we can look back to 2008 when the government implemented a policy expanding their very ambitious goals for English language learning as laid out in its 'Foreign Language Teaching and Learning Project in the National Education System during the Period of 2008–2020' policy ('NFLP 2020' for short). The primary aim of this policy was to ensure that all students graduating from secondary schools, colleges, vocational schools and universities would be able to confidently use a foreign language, for the most part, the targeted language was English. NFLP 2020 was revised in 2017 with an even stronger focus on the English language, and, although the official language will remain Vietnamese, *English for Everyone* has become the goal of the government (Ngo and Tran 2024).

These policies have directly affected the education sector as can be seen from these requirements (Ngo and Tran 2024: 56):

1. Disciplinary subjects such as math and science should be taught in a foreign language (sometimes French or Chinese are chosen, but English is the overwhelming favorite).
2. All students' education must include 10 years of foreign language study, applied between grades 3 to 12.
3. 50% of vocational training must be taught in a foreign language in accordance with competency and skill requirements.
4. All students in foreign language majors at universities must meet language requirements upon graduating and 80% of other majors must also meet those requirements.
5. All students in foreign language pedagogy must follow professional guidelines and meet all of the requirements of a foreign language teacher's capacity.

Although these policies have been reinforced in a statement from the prime minister, this top-down approach has been difficult to implement successfully because of a lack of consultation from the people who would be most affected by these policies, namely teachers, administrators, parents and students (Nguyen 2017).

Especially when considering secondary education, other problems have also become apparent hindering the success in achieving such ambitious goals including large class sizes, which impede learning due to sheer numbers (meaning a lack of attention from teachers), but also because English competencies vary dramatically from student to student. The problem is compounded by a lack of sufficient time to implement English curricula aimed at meeting the objectives promoted by the government.

Another trouble spot is the lack of properly trained teachers who can implement the curricular aims of the government's ideals of focusing on communicative abilities of the students. Thus, many teachers still rely on and believe in the traditional ways of teaching English with a strong focus on exams. In addition, although Vietnam is on the rise economically, educational facilities are still in the process of trying to catch up, so in many cases students lack access to proper learning facilities and reference materials, not to mention being stuck studying English using outdated materials. These troubles are compounded by generally poor attitudes towards

studying English from a large swath of students—evidenced by low motivation and low scores on the English section of the national university exams (Le 2019; Ngo 2019; Ngo and Tran 2024; Nguyen and Nguyen 2019; Nhung 2019).

At the university level, I observed some English classes that were being given at a private university through a glass panel. Most of the students I saw were English majors; they were attentive to the lessons and seemed very motivated. In comparison, non-English majors at the undergraduate level need take only 10% of their credits as English courses and only 12% at the graduate school level. In other words, the intensity drops significantly once students have secured a spot in university, mirroring Japan and Taiwan. For those who have chosen English as their major, there are ample opportunities in the job market, including jobs for English teachers, interpreters/translators, lecturers and researchers (Hoang 2009; Ngo and Tran 2024).

On the business front, Vietnam is eager to promote English as the main language of communication. However, as universities do not really require non-English majors to invest much time in studying English, the English language skills of those graduating students tend to be deficient, which has led to much complaining from recruiters. To address this shortcoming, private English language teaching centers (ELTs) have been popping up everywhere aimed at boosting the communicative English abilities of businessmen and businesswomen (Freiermuth 2002; Ngo and Tran 2024; Nguyen and Nguyen 2019). In addition, international success in other Asian nations has been attributed to their commitment to raising the level of the English so they are able to compete and negotiate with their partners. Vietnam is no exception in their aims; however, they have not been able to achieve their goals yet (Huynh et al. 2024). As there is a link between employability and English proficiency in the ever increasing international world, to maximize opportunities and thrive on the job, Vietnamese workers must possess enough English to effectively communicate with their business partners.

My advice to Vietnam is this: 'Do not let short-term negative results derail the program; rather open the doors wide to outside English experts who can help teachers as well as students in their development, while simultaneously promoting the use of English for non-English majors in the universities.' If the Vietnamese government can keep the ship on this course, 'good' English washback will have a positive effect on all sectors of society.

Thailand

I have been to Thailand several times for conferences and have participated in online English classes mixing Japanese and Thai students. A positive point is that Thai students seem willing to communicate in English. This represents the fruits of a shift from passive-style English classes to learner-centered classrooms with lifelong learning objectives, which can be directly tied to the National Education Act of 1999. This has had a snowball effect as more and more educational institutions have employed communicative language practices. Such practices have encouraged independent and autonomous language learning to develop (Baker and Jarunthawatchai 2017; Darasawang 2007; Wongsothorn et al. 2002).

This ideal has carried over into society as well. I have talked with several individuals in English, and not only in the tourist areas of Bangkok; I have chatted with street vendors, retail clerks, massage therapists and restaurant workers. The important point here is that they at least tried to use English or immediately sought to find someone who could communicate better in English. My narrative has some merit. Although Thai is considered their universal language and Thais are considered to be a fairly homogeneous group, as many as one in ten Thai residents speak Thai as their second language. This boosts the use of English as a language to communicate with others (Warotamasikkhadit and Person 2011).

From a historical perspective, English has enjoyed privileged status for quite some time. Because Thailand has never been successfully invaded militarily by outsiders, it has had a

relatively stable government with an outward-looking monarchy. King Rama III and King Rama IV, who ruled from 1824 to 1851 and 1851 to 1868, respectively, got the ball rolling by hiring American missionaries and British tutors to teach English to members of the royal court; they deemed English as an important tool to negotiate with the Western world, which led to societal developments in Thailand. Both King Rama V (1868-1910) and King Rama VI (1910-1925) bolstered the importance of English introduced by their predecessors. The former started the Ministry of Education so as to educate Thai citizens in English and other subjects. The latter introduced a Western-style education system making English a compulsory subject after grade four, and he also provided the means to start the first university. Even after the absolute monarchy gave way to a constitutional government with a king still in place, English retained a place of honor in Thailand. In 1955, for example, English was designated as a compulsory subject for all university students (Baker and Jarunthawatchai 2017; Methitham and Chamcharatsri 2011).

By the mid-1970s, the effort to compel students to study English waned, and English was downgraded from a compulsory subject at all levels to an elective course at every level. Perhaps due to the fact that English has had a long and somewhat glorious history, this policy has done little to divert interest away from English. For example, in universities, English courses for first, second and third year students are still very popular with students. Perhaps, the unwavering popularity of English tempted the Ministry of Education in 2010 to attempt to make English an official second language. The effort, however, proved to be a very unpopular position with the Thai people and failed miserably. Nevertheless, English is still considered the primary second language carrying both status and weight (Baker and Jarunthawatchai 2017; Darasawang and Watson Todd 2012; Sukamolson 1998).

One might conclude from this apparent love for English by Thai citizens that all is rosy in Thailand regarding the teaching and learning of English; however, this is not the case. Switching from teacher-driven to learner-centered classrooms has not been an easy transition. Many English teachers are inadequately prepared to deliver lessons under the more demanding learner-centered approach and have consequently struggled under the additional burden. Teachers who cannot manage the transition have reverted to employing non-communicative approaches in the classroom to compensate (Adamson 2003; Baker 2012; Methitham and Chamcharatsri 2011; Talerngsri 2019).

As for the societal use of English, many Thai residents claim that English is no longer even a foreign language but is becoming or has already become a lingua franca for communication (Baker 2012). For example, Baker (2012:23) has claimed that although Thailand is located in the expanding circle like other EFL countries, English is the primary language for communication for international communication purposes. This position is somewhat tenuous in my opinion. In consideration of other countries in Asia, such as Japan, China and South Korea, do they not also use English for international engagement? In lands that should be considered truly ELF (English as a lingua franca) countries, it is not only international engagement that relies on English communication but English can be found in all corners of society—from retail to education to the government. Although I believe that English is extremely important to Thailand, in my own experience, English does not enjoy that kind of coverage yet. It is important for tourism to be sure, but once outside of the tourist areas, English may not be used as frequently or at all, especially by those who have not graduated from university and those living in rural areas (see especially Simpson 2011).

There are other cracks appearing as well. Although English is extremely important as a tool for conducting business and has long-enjoyed a favored status in Thailand, its ranking recently fell in the EF English Proficiency Index from 2018 to 2019, dropping from 64th to 74th relegating its status to the *Very Low Proficiency* group. Talerngsri (1) claims that despite Thai students' desire to be taught using communicative methods, many teachers still use teacher-centered

approaches whereby grammar exercises, vocabulary and rote memorization still rule the roost. She has recommended that learners compensate for the boring English classes by using online applications to play interactive games and work on pronunciation.

In addition, although business folks realize the importance of using English to conduct international negotiations, and have steadfastly kept a positive view of using English in the workplace, they have generally felt unprepared to actually communicate in English. This is tied to their lack of cultural knowledge of business partners outside of Thailand as well as having a limited understanding of important technical terms related to their fields (Dharmajiva 2017). Some Thai businessmen and businesswomen have also mentioned that they have trouble understanding the 'accents' of their business partners, thus interfering with the understanding of English communication (Hiranburana 2017). In addition, Thanamaimas (112) found that most Thai workers, in this case in the Department of Fisheries (including not only government officers but also workers and contracted temporary staff), expressed that they had difficulties in speaking English to international partners, had problems reading technical materials or reports and had struggled with all forms of business communication.

Despite moving in the right direction, Thailand still has not achieved its English language goals. If I were in the Ministry of Education, my advice would be as follows: 'Redouble your efforts to implement the communicative language approach advocated in the past, and make sure secondary schools and universities are adhering to the policies because that is what students and businesses desire and need.' Thailand has a great chance to move forward on the international stage, but if it neglects English communication skills, it will instead continue to drift further away from its aims.

Indonesia

I have been to Indonesia twice—once back in 2011 and once in 2023. In those two trips, I was able to observe a university class, teach one and visit a very famous tourist destination as a conference participant. As for the students, I found them to be respectful but hesitant on my first trip and talkative and open on the second trip. Without a doubt, location means everything in Indonesia. In tourist areas and international business areas, for example Jakarta and its affluent suburbs, English can be used relatively easily. Outside of these areas, even in some of the larger metropolises, finding even rudimentary-level English speakers may be difficult.

From a historical viewpoint, English was considered the premier foreign language, replacing Dutch once Indonesia had broken free from Dutch rule in 1945. Moving forward, English continued to be the favored foreign language, and it was finally designated as a compulsory language in secondary schools by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1990 (Dardjowidjojo 1998; 2000; Zein et al. 2020)

The Grammar-Translation Method was first used as the preferred method of teaching English. As class sizes were extremely large, compounded by a lack of proficient Indonesian English speakers to teach the classes, translating back and forth between Bahasa Indonesian and English was the logical choice for teaching. However, this method was abruptly replaced by approaches that emphasized speaking and listening. By 1975, Indonesia had turned towards Skinner-like behavioral approaches focusing on drills and phonetics. In 1984, The Ministry of Education made a complete shift away from these approaches that were steeped in structural accuracy and instead introduced communicative approaches, which eventually evolved into communicative approaches based on competencies. One of the biggest shifts in policy came in 2006 when the government allowed schools to develop their own curricula based upon the government standards. This was incorporated so that institutions could better cater to the needs of their own students. In 2013, yet another shift by the government was enacted, this time focusing on students' individual characteristics thereby reducing the number of hours junior and senior high

school students needed to study English to just two or three hours per week. Even with this reduction in study hours, English is still considered one of the necessary and important subjects by the government; however, these policies are bound to take their toll over the long haul (Madya 2003; 2007; Zein et al. 2020).

Concerning the implementation of policy, one problem that cannot be ignored is Indonesia's large population spread across some 6,000 inhabited islands. Bahasa Indonesian, of course, is the national language, but there are more than 700 indigenous languages used in Indonesia, making it the second most linguistically diverse country in the world (behind Papua New Guinea). This often relegates English to a third language for many Indonesians. This is not to say that English has lost its prestige—far from it. In such a linguistically diverse country, there is bound to be high (H) and low (L) language varieties. One is the 'H' version of Bahasa Indonesian (Kohler 2019), but as Zein et al. (2020: 6) have pointed out, it is English that has joined the 'H' variety of Indonesian:

> The emergence of English as a new centre of normativity is evident in light of the increasing prestige of the language within society and the prevalent social discourse that deems English important for social mobility, upward economic mobility and participation in the global economy.

There are two sides to this coin. Those families who have wealth and mobility can get the best education that money can buy. By chance, I met a family who knew the owners of a small restaurant where I was having supper while in Surabaya. The family was well-dressed and friendly. The parents greeted me in very good English, and their two high school sons were quite eager to converse with me. They were both keen on going overseas to study at university and had big dreams, which I have no doubt they were going to fulfill. On the flip side, I encountered two young men working at a small sweets shop and tried to order a dessert. I could not figure out from the menu board what the prices actually included. Luckily, I was the only one in the shop as it took us at least 10 minutes to work out the price simply because they knew so few English words, and I knew no Bahasa Indonesian beyond simple greetings.

In the classroom, the proficiency of Indonesian English teachers is wide-ranging, which coincides with their varied beliefs about teaching. Naturally this affects how their English classes are conducted. Many teachers, especially in rural areas, lack solid fundamental training in English education themselves, so it is difficult for them to effectively teach students. Specifically, they lack training to develop effective classroom tasks, give sound feedback, plan a cogent syllabus and even manage a classroom in order to meet students' needs. Others lack confidence in their own English skills and so avoid using English in the classroom whenever possible. Hence, teachers need better training at university so as to have a common understanding of best practices. Additionally, there needs to be adequate testing of the English skills of teachers as well as provisions for more opportunities for in-service learning and communicative activities, allowing them to actually use their English abilities (Masduqi 2011; Zein et al. 2020) It is demoralizing for students who are interested in learning English when their teachers feel uncomfortable using the language they are teaching. One vexing problem for the government is that many new and well-trained teachers are very hesitant to go out to the remote locations, as Madya (2007: 5) rues.

> [English teachers] in isolated areas … rarely have the opportunity to attend in-service education. Another problem is related to young teachers' reluctance to take up teaching appointments in these areas.

Problems with English education have spilled over into the business community, but government policy has also played a role. For example, the international business climate in

Indonesia has been hampered by Law 24/2009, which asserts that all contracts between Indonesians and individuals must be written in the Indonesian language. This caused a dispute about English-only contracts that were already in place. In 2013, the Ministry of Manpower declared that all foreign workers must communicate using Indonesian. Although President Widodo pushed back against these restrictions, some of these restrictions remain in place. This has caused great concern with international investors, especially from the Japanese who are huge investors in Indonesia. Surianta (2020) claims that this has been very bad for business. He suggests that instead of continuing down this road, they should look to Vietnam, which has opened their doors to outside investment by promoting language training in English as well as other languages. Employers agree with this idea, noting that the number one weakness in new employees is a lack of English proficiency, which they feel is sorely needed to conduct international business effectively (BAPPENAS 2015).

The future could be brighter for Indonesia if it takes a few forward-thinking steps. Here is my suggestion: 'First, cautions about what English might do to Indonesian cultural norms should be respected but not allowed to cripple the system because in the long-run, the inability to conduct business in English is a high price to pay, and second, the education sector should warm to the idea of English language requirements starting as early as primary school using well-trained and well-paid English teachers who know the value of the communicative skills that business has been calling for.' Indonesia has many problems to contend with, but if the government maintains a steady approach and it can get the education sector to buy in on forward-thinking English language policies, there are fantastic opportunities on the horizon.

The Future of English

In this section, I will try to bring some of the elements discussed in the previous sections together because there are several troubles that wind a thread through the countries discussed. The future of English in each country hinges on whether or not such elements can be addressed successfully. With that said, each problem mentioned here is intricately entwined with others, so when discussing one issue, one can easily see how it is linked to other problems.

To start with, governments in these countries have a central role to play as they control the levers of power in the form of policy. Governments are often unable to grasp problems at the micro-level while maintaining some sort of semblance of control at the macro-level. Going too far in either direction creates problems. This has been an underappreciated problem for all of the aforementioned countries and a conundrum that is rarely discussed directly. If government policy dictates a major change in English education and then advocates strict adherence to such a policy, it will immediately put tremendous pressure on the education sector, which must deal with the fallout of the policy for both students and teachers, most of whom are already operating under the guidelines of one policy and are suddenly forced to switch. This leads to resistance by teachers and administrators who bear the brunt of such massive changes. On the other hand, if the policy allows complete freedom to teach English at the local level in whatever way the school deems best, this gives local schools license to completely ignore communicative goals that students generally desire, likely resulting in English being taught using antiquated and unpopular approaches. In addition, rapidly changing policies almost guarantee that there will be uneven results; some forward-thinking schools in urban areas with funds and well-trained teachers will benefit, and rural schools without sufficient funding and often lacking in well-trained teachers (sometimes lacking in even securing enough teachers) will pay the price, widening the gap in the urban-rural divide.

Governments are often slow to act when implementing policy change; however, when they do act, the change is often dramatic. Schools across the country must then scramble to try to implement the changes in curriculum. Many of the changes in government policy are well-

researched and warranted, but they tend to put everything in one basket making successful implementation nearly impossible. Failures by schools to introduce necessary changes push government policymakers into backpedaling and making adjustments. Although there is no easy solution to this problem, abandonment of the policy is not a good way forward, nor is doubling down on unwieldy policy. The former leads to chaos, and the latter leads to resistance. Instead, whenever possible, policy should be altered incrementally. Government policy may state this, but in many cases, there are few guiding principles or clear benchmarks, making it difficult for the education sector to understand and implement. Of course, this is terribly difficult to pull off, but implementing a 10-year step-by-step program, for example, would go a long way to addressing some of the embedded problems. To get there successfully means that policy needs to be created with input from the education sector with open ears and not just from successful schools in urban areas (Zein et al. 2020).

There is one additional point concerning the importance of benchmarks. One of the nagging problems for all of these countries is related to test washback. Teachers and administrators at secondary institutions naturally base their English curriculum on critically important 'gateway' exams for entrance into the next level; if those exams are based solely on grammatical structures and vocabulary, that is what schools will focus their teaching on—irrespective of any outlined communicative goals. Tests need to incorporate listening and, if possible, speaking to effectively washback to the schools' curricula. Of course, this will be very expensive to manage, but there are private tests that already promote these skills (such as TOEIC LR and SW). Governments, if they are brave enough, could farm these tests out to private and highly professional companies such as TOEIC, who would be more than willing to take on such a challenge with governmental support. Would this create problems? Indubitably, but government-created exams are already fraught with problems. After an adjustment period, these professional agencies would be a much better solution because testing English abilities is their sole function (Kamiya 2024).

Getting everyone on the same page costs money. All of these countries want their English language learning goals to be achieved, but budgetary constraints are always an issue, and every governmental agency also wants their piece of the pie. I make the case for English education because it has great potential to increase the size of the pie. If more people can speak English, getting international contracts and internationalizing business within the country will become that much easier, and the government can collect more revenues from all of the new business activities. Of all of the countries discussed here, I think the Vietnamese government understands this idea better than the rest (Freiermuth and Kanaya under review); however, even they can do more.

First, invest in the rural sector and that means an investment in technology. Rural (and sometimes even urban) areas in many of these countries suffer from basic technological problems such as a lack of adequate internet access. Such problems make individual schools feel isolated, and this leads to an overall malaise for businesses and schools (Zein et al. 2020); such issues also have the potential to derail exciting online communicative opportunities with others (Do and Freiermuth 2020; Madya 2007). Schools and businesses simply cannot function properly when they do not have the technological capabilities to compete. With that said, technology is only as good as how well it is applied. Technology can be a wonderful tool, taking students beyond the walls of the classroom, but English language learners still need structure and direction in assigned tasks and that means qualified teachers. Without these essentials students will either lose motivation or become frustrated (Freiermuth and Huang 2021).

Along these same lines, for most countries, the urban-rural divide seems to be an intractable problem. Governments have tried offering higher pay to tempt new graduates to teach English in remote areas but with mixed results (Madya 2007; Senase 2019). They can do more. Besides increased pay, one thing governments could do to incentivize English teachers to teach in rural

areas is to guarantee a full scholarship at a university in exchange for teaching at least three years at one of the designated locations. Added to that, they could also guarantee that at least one other graduating English teacher would also be sent to the same particular remote school for the same period of time, so each English teacher would not feel so isolated.

With that said, it is important to understand that the teaching problem goes deeper than the urban-rural problem. Whenever government policy changes, it is imperative to invest time and money on training English teachers to fit with those policy guidelines—both for those teachers who are in university and those who are already working. Even in Japan, the wealthiest country on this 'list,' there are plenty of newly hired secondary school English teachers who cannot communicate effectively in English. If the government wants international business to succeed, it needs new hires who can communicate effectively in English. In turn, this means that those workers need to be taught by English teachers who are not only trained to teach communicative skills but who can communicate effectively in English themselves. For this plan to work, there is a need for proper assessment of English teachers, including a communicative component as a requirement to be able to begin teaching English, and this, in turn, would also mean an alteration to curricula designed for English teachers.

I also want to mention business briefly. English has been and still is a central feature of success in business. On the whole, businesses want newly hired graduates who can use English on day one. None of these countries has achieved such a lofty aim. As such, businesses are tasked with the job of English education. This problem goes far beyond a little boning up of new hires' English skills, instead requiring dedicated language training, which means outside help at private English language schools. Some universities have begun to understand this problem and have started offering certain business, computer skills and engineering courses in English. Such courses are a good start, but there is still a very long way to go (Freiermuth 2002; Houghton et al. 2019; Huynh et al. 2024).

The final factor I wish to discuss is fear. Fear is something that filters down from the top policymakers, winding its way through the business and education sectors until it finally arrives at the doorstep of the English language learning students. Fear is a two-sided coin to be sure. A healthy amount of fear preventing a cataclysmic error when changing English policy at any level can be a good thing, but when fear overwhelms to the point of inertia, it also impedes potential success.

As we have already discussed curriculum policy changes in this section, the first fear I wish to discuss is the fear of English doing damage to the native language or an indigenous language. I think these fears are somewhat inflated. Rather than harming Singapore, English has elevated it; nevertheless, English is not the native language of most speakers in Singapore, and besides the many languages, there are also a variety of dialects and pidgins, making it a linguistically diverse place indeed (Healy 2024). As for all the countries on my 'list,' English will never replace the national language in primary or secondary school, so touting the fear that English might be dangerous is untenable. Keeping the national language for most of primary education is still a noble goal, but the introduction of a little more English would not hurt. When children enter secondary school, English could again be boosted, including at least some time dedicated to communication. Clever schools could introduce something like 'English on Friday,' whereby the school would dedicate a few hours to English communication once a week, along with some English-oriented events planned on special occasions.

As for the fear of damaging indigenous languages, the problem is a bit trickier. Of course, they should be protected but at what cost? If they are being used in the home, then local schools do have a responsibility to teach some courses using the local language, but perhaps those classes can be given following the normal school day for an hour or two. This may sound harsh, but if students are deprived of their full allotment of English classes, is it also not true that they are being deprived of opportunities in the future where communicative skills in English could be

the make-or-break decision maker? There are sometimes no easy solutions to this kind of problem, but certainly the cutting of English classes is not one of them (Zein et al. 2020).

The final fear is communicating in English. This fear is in some ways the most problematic. If English language learners cannot use English when presented with an opportunity to use it due to their own fear, then the hours, days and years they have spent learning English will have been in vain. I claimed this is the most problematic of all fears but it need not be. As my own Japanese students have emphasized to me time and time again, they wanted to speak English in secondary school. It was their teachers who prevented it from happening. If students are given the chance to speak with one another at least for a few minutes each day, it can go a long way towards allaying some their fears, but that also means that the English teachers must also express confidence in communicating in English. If they are fearful of using English, is it any wonder that students also become fearful?

Does the future look bright for English language learning in these EFL countries? That depends. It starts with cogent policy based on incremental rather than grand-scale changes, but that is not enough. Policymakers need to get all of the stakeholders on board and make sure that all of the schools have everything they need to enact the policy. That still is not enough. They need to set specific guidelines for schools, English teachers and language learners, and then, there need to be the proper checks for all of the groups to make sure they are achieving the objectives. Learning English and communicating in English are sometimes at odds with one another, but there is a burgeoning awareness that the latter indicates the success of the former. Realistic and forward-looking goals are achievable. Will it be easy? Obviously not, but the final reward will be beneficial for everyone in the country.

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