

## English as the ASEAN *lingua franca* in Thai Higher Education

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### Abstract

This article discusses the impact of English as the ASEAN *lingua franca* on teachers and students in Thai higher education due to the upcoming unification of ASEAN by 2015. The mobility programs for students and academic staff will lead to linguistic and cultural diversity in the university landscape in Thailand. Since English has been adopted as the working language of ASEAN, it raises questions regarding the extent to which it will have an impact on teachers and students in Thai universities. This article strives for raising our awareness of English as a *lingua franca* that can promote positive attitudes among ASEAN members. Consequently, it is advisable to conduct more research that can inform authorities guided for the appropriate English language policy and ELT pedagogies to enable Thai university teachers and students to adjust, accommodate, and prepare themselves to engage in this foreseeable future of ASEAN community in 2015.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, English as a *lingua franca*, Thai higher education, English language teaching and learning

### Introduction

This article discusses the impact of English on teachers and students in Thai higher education due to the upcoming unification of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2015. This regional integration will inevitably exert a great impact on higher education among ASEAN nations in many aspects such as quality assurance, recognition of degrees and qualifications, learning outcomes, credit transfer system, and mobility programs for students and academic staff. This regional cooperation focuses on facilitating university staff and student mobility, research collaboration, and the exchange of ideas on institutional management and development (Lee, 2007). ASEAN University Network (AUN), for example, is established as an autonomous organization under an umbrella of ASEAN and the mandate of Ministers responsible for higher education in ASEAN countries, which involves with the promotion of human resource development in the field of higher education within ASEAN and with its collaborative partnership countries such as Japan, Korea, China, India, Russia, and the EU. Kampan (2009) suggests the university mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP)/AUN create an international credit transfer system in the ASEAN region by setting criteria for credit transfer

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among ASEAN nations. Higher education network and collaboration in ASEAN is relevant to one of the purposes of The ASEAN Charter is “to promote an ASEAN identity through the fostering of greater awareness of the diverse culture and heritage of the region” (ASEAN, 2008, p.5). This purpose raises the concerning issues regarding the development of strategies to enable citizens in transitioning from nation-state mentalities to regional and cultural citizenry; the empowerment of diverse populations to form an ASEAN identity; and the role of education (Jones, 2004). A few Thai universities have set their strategic plans by promoting the quality of their education to meet the international standard (Paiwithayasiritham, 2013). As a result, there will be an increase in the number of ASEAN students across our region, and that inevitably leads to multilingualism within university landscapes in Southeast Asia.

### English as the ASEAN *lingua franca*

The term *lingua franca* has been variously defined. Drawing upon Wardhaugh (2002), a *lingua franca* is viewed as “a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them” (p.58). McArthur (2002) refers to a *lingua franca* as “a language, usually in a simplified, adapted, or specialized form, used as a means of communication among groups of people who do not have a common language” (p.3). Baker (2009) claims that “*lingua franca* languages are traditionally associated with communication between people who have different first languages from the language being used to communicate” (p.569). English as a *lingua franca* can be viewed as “a way of referring to communication in English between speakers with different first languages” (Seidlhofer, 2005, p.339). For example, in ASEAN community, Thai people and speakers of neighboring countries like Malaysia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and Cambodia have to employ English as their *lingua franca* or common language to communicate with each other.

Graddol (2006) states that English as a *lingua franca* requires “non-native” speakers to develop pragmatic strategies for intercultural communication, to retain their national identities in terms of accents, and to negotiate themselves for mutual understanding with other “non-native” speakers (p.87). Jenkins (2007) suggests that English as a *lingua franca* reflect the identities of its *lingua franca* speakers, which are also critically affected by their language attitudes. Lai’s (2008) study, for example, suggests that although Taiwanese university English teachers prefer to teach their students with English native speakers’ model, it is important to raise the students’ awareness of varieties of Englishes including English as a *lingua franca* (p.44). “English as a *lingua franca* must be one of the central concerns in this line of research if we want to understand the use of English in today’s world” (Mauranen, 2006, p. 147). Thus, English use in cross-cultural communicative competence has also become

one of the key aspects in terms of preparing learners for life and career skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

As a result, there has recently been a call for improved curriculum, teaching and assessment, which are all related with one another in order to promote their skills and competence that will meet the needs of future workforce (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009; Silva, 2009). Zhao & Coombs (2012), for instance, state that in order to foster Chinese graduates to become globally competitive, higher education needs to equip their students with new types of competence including critical thinking, written communication, and intercultural knowledge and capacity that can be applied and transferred across different socio-cultural contexts, including higher education. The following section will discuss the roles of English in Thai higher education.

### **The roles of English in Thai higher education**

Despite the fact that there are more than 1,000 spoken languages such as Bahasa Indonesia, Burmese, Cambodian, Javanese, Laotian, Malay, and Thai in Southeast Asia, English has become the official regional *lingua franca* based on Article 34 of The ASEAN Charter, which reads, “The working language of ASEAN shall be English” (ASEAN, 2008, p.29). McArthur (2002) claims that since 1967 English has been employed as an ASEAN working language and increasingly become important in communications with China, Japan, and other Asian nations, and thus English is currently the *lingua franca* in Asia. Consequently, according to Bolton (2008), English is spoken by more than 800 million people in Asia. There is a strong argument over English as a *lingua franca* as the pressure to use English increases because universities accept foreign students and lecturers, as a result, encounter bi- and multilingual students (Crystal, 2003). Furthermore, when English has been chosen as a means of communication in ASEAN, this raises the issues of the dominance of English in ASEAN higher education. This issue is highly relevant as English has become dominant in higher education worldwide (Phillipson, 2006). For instance, English has recently been adopted as a medium of instruction in European higher education, demonstrating its growing dominance as an international language (Coleman, 2006).

Drawing upon Lee et al. (2010), English plays an important role on non-native undergraduates in multilingual and multicultural higher education contexts. In Thailand, according to the Proposals for the Second Decade of Education Reform (2009 – 2018) provided by the Office of the Education Council, Ministry of Education, one of the measures that aims to promote quality development of education and learning at all levels is to study a widely used foreign language as a second language and those of neighboring ASEAN countries as a third

language. The adoption of English as the language of education indicates English as a language of access to the economic, political, and social powers (Probyn, 2008). Jenkins (2000), on the other hand, argues for the advantages of English as a *lingua franca* that it suggests commonalities among speakers from different L1s, accepts local varieties of English and certain characteristics of the L1 (such as accent), and promotes the ownership of English for “non-native” speakers (p.11). In this article, therefore, views an English speaker as anyone who uses English regardless of their first or official language or whether they are “native” speakers of English, which means “native” and “non-native” speakers of English are included in this article. English language will potentially enhance the unification of ASEAN members who will realize that we have something in common in order to create and strengthen ASEAN as our regional community. It is essential to gain a better understanding of English speakers’ identities in multilingual academic settings by critically discussing how speakers of English construct and negotiate their identities while living and learning in this diverse ASEAN academic community.

Although this article focuses on higher education, Kachru & Smith (2008) state that most governments and educational institutions worldwide have gradually implemented language policies regarding English literacy at every level of education. In Thailand, English language teaching and learning primarily aims to improve graduates’ communicative competence (Somsai & Intaraprasert, 2011). In fact, English proficiency of Thai people still remains a matter of concerns because they perform less well than regional neighbors (Baker, 2008). As English has undoubtedly become a global *lingua franca*, the Thai government recognizes that a sound knowledge of English is necessary for university graduates to be equipped with relevant English skills, and thus English teaching is vital in Thai higher education system (Foley, 2005). There are, however, challenges for Thai higher education in terms of students’ English proficiency and skills. Although Tietze (2008) notes English is an important tool for communication, collaboration, and progressing knowledge in academic contexts, Nagi (2011) claims that the use of English as a medium of instruction in universities in ASEAN members, especially in Thailand, is a main disadvantage for borderless education due to the historical lack of foundation in English language.

The following section discusses possible recommendations toward the impact of English as the ASEAN *lingua franca* on Thai higher education.

## Recommendations

There are four key recommendations with regards to English as a *lingua franca* in Thai higher education in terms of research, sociolinguistic issues, and English language teacher

education, which can inform authorities including university executives and academic staff with the appropriate English language policies in Thai universities.

First of all, research regarding English as a *lingua franca* has demonstrated that users' attitudes are changing towards the variety of English accents (Hynninen, 2010). It is evident that English has become the regional language that takes over the educational domain due to the mobility of teachers and students in ASEAN. Kachru & Smith (2008) assure that the demand of English in education and its use in the international communities will thrive toward multilingualism that requires users of English develop sensitivity to more than one variety of English; and, as a result, they can accommodate different varieties of English for successful communication in various contexts.

Drawing upon studies regarding Thai university teachers' and students' attitudes towards English, Phothongsunan & Suwannarak's study (2008) suggest that Thai English teachers at the tertiary level view "native" speakers have more advantages in terms of appropriate language use, linguistic competence, and pronunciation, while Thai university students prefer to study listening and speaking skills with "native" speakers rather than Thai teachers who are good at content and grammar. Nomnian (2009) claims that Thai postgraduate students in a British university can improve their communication with "non-native" peers such as Chinese and Taiwanese by socializing and creating closer friendships although some Thai students still prefer to make friends with "native" speakers who can help them improve their English. These studies illustrate different attitudes of teachers and students in different socio-cultural contexts that can provide fundamental understanding for this research. Research in this field is advisable in order to raise Thai university teachers' and learners' awareness of varieties of English that can bring about positive attitudes towards speakers from ASEAN nations.

Second, it is important for Thai speakers of English to be aware of sociolinguistic issues including "standard" and "non-standard" forms of English and "formal" and "informal" use of English. Scales et al. (2006) argue that it is important for users of English become versatile in participating in a variety of interactions in order to achieve their communicative goals, promote mutual intelligibility, increase communicative flexibility, and respect for accent diversity. Formality signifies status, while informality focuses on equality; and thus, hierarchical cultures emphasize the formal use of language (Varner & Beamer, 2011). Recognizing how, when, where and to whom you are addressing is vital because the inappropriate use of English for lecturers, staff and students can adversely cause ineffective communication for both parties. In terms of writing, teachers and students should use formal English with its standard

written forms, which can be well received by readers; whereas spoken English can slightly be informal and non-standard depending on the contexts.

For example, you may write to your colleague that “I wonder whether you will be available for the meeting tomorrow?” which is very formal with the use of standard English. Yet, when you meet him/her in person, you may say “Free for the meeting tomorrow?” with less formal and non-standard forms. In Thai education contexts, teachers and students will address their colleagues and teachers as “Ajarn” meaning “teacher” followed by the name of their teacher (Mathias, 2011); therefore, Dr. John Smith will be called “Ajarn John” instead of “Dr. Smith” or “John”. The word “Ajarn” shows respect to the teacher who is being addressed and reflects the speaker’s politeness. This can be used in both formal and informal situations. Thus, it is significant for both Thai and non-Thai teachers and students to be sensitive to sociocultural issues in communication in order to promote better understanding.

Last but not least, English language teacher education is instrumental in meeting the multiple and diverse needs in the globalised society. Wiriyaichitra (2007) suggests that English language teaching in Thailand has to be more effective so that Thai teachers of English will be more equipped with teaching methodology that can enable learners’ English competency. For instance, Nomnian (2013) states that sociocultural aspects must be incorporated into classroom teaching so that learners will be more aware of local and global issues and develop a more positive attitude toward other “non-Anglophone” countries, especially those nations in ASEAN. To improve better English proficiency of teachers and learners in ASEAN, Kirkpatrick (2010) proposes that the adoption of the multilingual model for English language teaching in ASEAN is appropriate; thus English teachers in ASEAN must be well-trained to reach a high level of English proficiency in order to diminish the authority of “native” speakers. It is thus advisable to explore students from wider linguistic and ethnic backgrounds from ASEAN nations and to find out their attitudes towards their own and others’ use of English within Thai university settings. Consequently, we can become more aware of different language users’ psychological and sociological aspects, which can enhance our understanding regarding the extent to which speakers of different languages develop positive and negative attitudes towards their classmates’ use of English and its varieties in Thai higher education.

## Conclusion

This article offers some insights that might stimulate and create intellectual space for researchers and scholars to reflect on English as the ASEAN *lingua franca* in Thai higher education. Since ASEAN unification has recently been an emerging phenomenon in Thai higher education, especially with regard to English language teaching and applied linguistics, there is a

limited number of this line of research conducted in higher education contexts in Thailand. More studies are needed in order to narrow down this emerging gap in the literature and research in terms of the impact of English as the ASEAN *lingua franca* on the attitudes of Thai teachers and students, as well as teachers and students from ASEAN nations, which can be underpinned by a whole host of issues, although some of which may have never been brought to our attention. It is important for members of ASEAN community to recognize how and the extent to which other languages and the varieties of English spoken with ASEAN community are equally valued and respected. As a result, we are able to live harmoniously in this diverse region by accommodating and negotiating one another in order to achieve effective communication, create peace and friendship, and eventually unite our region as one. The article hopes to encourage English teachers, academic staff, researchers, and scholars in Thai higher education to recognize the issues regarding English as the ASEAN *lingua franca* that can vitally contribute to the development of the appropriate English language teaching implications in order to enable Thai university teachers and students to adjust, accommodate, and prepare themselves to engage in this foreseeable future of ASEAN community in 2015.

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