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## English in Southeast Asia: Features, Policy and Language in Use

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**BOOK REVIEW**

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**Low, E. L., & Azirah. H. (Eds.). (2012). *English in Southeast Asia: Features, policy and language in use*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.**

*English in Southeast Asia: Features, policy and language in use* is suitable for scholars in linguistics, language policy planning, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, for the book focuses on three aspects: Southeast Asian English features, language planning policy, and language in use. The book is fundamentally based on the theory of Kachru and Nelson's (2006) 'Three Circles' with the focus on the Outer Circle (Singapore, The Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei) and the Expanding Circle (Thailand) where English is not the first language of Southeast Asian local speakers. Also, theories of English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as an international language (EIL) are discussed by a number of scholars in this book.

The first part, which comprises the first six chapters (Chapters 2-7), consists of a collection of previous empirical studies on SEA Englishes linguistic realizations in terms of lexical features, phonological features, grammatical features, and pragmatics features. The general issues being drawn from the first seven chapters begin with variables leading to the style shift and language use in SEA Englishes, including levels of formality in the conversations, socioeconomic background of the speakers, and the hierarchic social structure. The evidence from the study shows that

SEA Englishes are subject to sociological context which has brought about differences in linguistic features within countries. Secondly, the clear separation between a nativized English variety and English as an International Language (EIL) is mentioned. Thai English is considered as EIL while Singapore English and Philippine English are indigenized ones. Thirdly, two approaches to the study of new English varieties are discussed: the former is by comparing and contrasting linguistic features of New English with Standard English (US and UK) and the latter is by focusing on linguistic features of each English variety.

The second part, which consists of the following six chapters (Chapters 8-13), stresses language planning which influences language choices in Southeast Asian countries and on how Southeast Asian language users negotiate and react to the implemented language planning. Three types of effects of language planning on Southeast Asian nations and people are suggested in the book; they are those with positive, negotiable and negative effects. Singapore is an example of a Southeast Asian country in which the national policy has positive effects on historical nation building and the creation of the country's competitive advantage as one of the world's economic leaders after English has taken a dominant position in educational, social and economical arenas.

In a different vein, the Malaysian and Brunei language policy demonstrates negotiable effects on bilingual educational environments where English has been enlisted as the second language in academic instructions along with national languages. While the bilingual educational scheme has been initiated smoothly in Brunei, it has been unsettled and criticized in Malaysia due to dissatisfaction of educators and students who deny using English solely in the national education. Last but not least, the policy in the Philippines is a failing example of the nation's language planning policy. As the nation marginalizes local languages, such as Tagalog and Cebuano, and solely embraces English which is neither the first nor the second language of the locals, the unfamiliarity of English as

a new language to students has led to poor performance of students nationwide in Mathematics and the Sciences, which are instructed in English.

The study of policy effects on English language teaching at secondary schools in Thailand is reported on to end part two. On having a different status as an Expanding Circle country, the role of Thai educational sectors in delivering language policy is influential and controversial. The study in Chapter 12 illustrates current problems within Thailand's foreign language policy planning. Firstly, there have been a large number of proposed policies, leading to implementers' confusions. Secondly, there have been a variety of practices in schools signifying decentralization of the main language policies. Thirdly, Thailand currently overemphasizes language planning documentation rather than policy implementation.

The final part of the book, covering Chapters 14 to 19, explores South East Asian Englishes in daily use such as through law, pop culture and electronic communication. It is found in Chapter 14 that English is used most frequently in Anglophone influential countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, and it plays less important roles in non-Anglophone countries, namely Indonesia and Thailand. Given the current popularity of English in the Southeast Asian legal system, a question remains whether English use in the legal field would deteriorate due to multicultural forces and globalization. In the next chapter, the researcher conducted a study on four Outer Circle Southeast Asian Englishes to examine whether they can be categorized as code-mixed varieties. A list of theories is employed in empirical research, entailing Code-switching, Language Alternation (LA), and Pidgin and Creole Linguistics. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that Englishes in the Expanding Circle (Thailand and Indonesia) have not been studied although they share linguistic similarities with other Southeast Asian nations. Chapter 16 presents an aspect of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in pedagogy. Many scholars, namely Mufwene (2001, 2007), Seidlhofer (2009) and Sridhar and

S.N. Sridhar (1986) support the concept that the outline of curriculum and lesson-planning concepts should be initiated from the reality of multilingual settings. Hence, we here observe changing theoretical perspectives which reject the classical myth of Kachru (1990) who suggests that the way students acquire a second language should follow Inner Circle countries or Standard English norms.

In Chapter 17, the investigation of Southeast Asian pop culture is introduced in sociolinguistics research to understand how English functions as a 'link language' among Southeast Asian cultures in advertising, print, radio and pop music. Researchers examine linguistic changes in online communities in Malaysia and study how English negotiates itself in the multilingual context. Interestingly, the research has shown linguistic development in the informal variety through the younger generations who are the main users of electronic discourse. Chapter 19 addresses the pragmatic issue of politeness in Malaysian English (MalE) regarding the level of directness through the new variety. Also, the data is compared with the politeness of British English (BrE) to find sources of miscommunication amongst intercultural communicators. Lastly, the book ends with a useful list of bibliographies which academics can use to start future research.

To recapitulate, this book provides a 'free' space for Southeast Asian researchers to conduct studies on new English varieties occurring and developing in Southeast Asia. Moving away from Anglo-centric eyes, readers can gain better insights into these English varieties through the voices and perspectives of local authors. Another strong point of this book is that it treats each SEA English as a new English variety with linguistic uniqueness and with equal right to the Standard English. As a firm standing point, which is repeated throughout this book, all SEA varieties are not homogenized as they are distinguished in their sociological and historical factors. In terms of recommendation, I noticed that each English variety's linguistic features are studied separately. However, I

suggest that there be comparative research between SEA Englishes in future studies so that we can better understand how SEA varieties are similar or different. Also, I encourage more studies on English belonging to the Expanding Circle, namely Thai English, Indonesian English, or Cambodian English, because English has been vastly proliferating, especially in social and economic areas despite the fact that English is a foreign language in these countries. Last but not least, I wholeheartedly recommend that researchers who are interested in World Englishes and Southeast Asian Englishes explore a monograph series of *Varieties of English Around the World (VEAW)*, published by John Benjamins Publishing company. It provides both text series containing specimens of English varieties around the world and also the studies of a particular region which have been written by local scholars.

### **The Reviewer**

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