

On Making Mandarin a Language of Wider Communication in ASEAN: What Can We Learn from Our Past Experience

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, in many of the countries in Southeast Asia, there has been an exponential growth among their populace an interest in learning Mandarin, the standard form of the modern Chinese language. The reason is mainly due to a deepening of economic ties between China and the 10-nation bloc of political and economic union called ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Although the various Southeast Asian states each has their own national language, they have adopted English, a non-native language of the region, as the working language of ASEAN. As a matter of fact, English is an international *lingua franca* in Southeast Asia. This, of course, is a result of the global political and economic developments that have taken place over the several decades after the Second World War. In view of the recent economic and technological rise of China on a global scale, and the strengthening of economic relations between China and ASEAN, will the Chinese language become another language of wide communication in Southeast Asia? This paper aims to answer the question by first taking a look at the spread of English in Southeast Asia, and through which understand the prospects and challenges of making Chinese a language of wider communication in ASEAN.

Keywords

ASEAN; Chinese Language Teaching and Learning; *Hanyu*; Language in Education; Mandarin; *Putonghua*; Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Although the various countries in Southeast Asia (SEA) each has their own national language, they have adopted English, a non-native language of the region, as the working language of their bloc of political and economic union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN. As a matter of fact, English is an inter-national *lingua franca* in Southeast Asia. This, of

course, is a result of the global political and economic developments that have taken place over the several decades after the Second World War. Nevertheless, in the last twenty years or so, in many of the Southeast Asian states there has been an exponential growth among their populace an interest in learning Mandarin, the standard form of the modern Chinese language. In view of the recent economic and technological rise of China on a global scale, and the strengthening of economic relations between China and ASEAN, will Mandarin become another language of wide communication in SEA? This paper attempts to answer the question by first taking a look at the spread of English in the region, and through which understand the prospects and challenges of making Mandarin a language of wider communication in ASEAN.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language and Economic

The surge of an interest in recent time by the people of Southeast Asia to learn Mandarin is mainly driven by a deepening of economic ties between China and ASEAN. China is making her presence felt in the region by becoming the largest trading partner of most of the ASEAN states. By 2019, the bi-lateral trade between China and ASEAN had reached 507.9 billion US Dollars, comprising 18% of the latter's total trade volume. In the same year, direct foreign investment flew from China to ASEAN was 9.1 billion US Dollars, "accounting for 5.7% of the total FDI flows into the region".¹ It had been reported that, "in the first two months of 2020" ASEAN "has replaced the European Union (EU) to emerge as China's largest trading partner".² The trend remains so to this day, in the first 11 months of 2024, bi-lateral trade between China and ASEAN had reached 6.29 trillion RMB, making the latter the biggest trading partner of the former. In absolute terms, the trade volume between China and ASEAN constitutes 15.8% of the former's total foreign trade, while EU, US and South Korea respectively trailed by 12.8%, 11.2% and 5.3%, during the same period.³

Such a development, naturally, creates vast economic opportunity and as a result incentivizes the people in ASEAN to learn Mandarin. Therefore, perhaps it is safe to say that the recent surge in the region, an interest in learning the Chinese language, is mainly driven by materialistic or monetary incentives. It may thus be meaningful to ask, should the economic relations

¹ See "ASEAN-China Economic Relation: Overview" on ASEAN website: <https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/asean-china-economic-relation/> [accessed 7 September 2023].

² *Global Times* website: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1181864> [accessed 25 November 2020].

³ See Xiang, X. (2025).

between China and ASEAN continue to grow, will Mandarin become another language of wide communication in Southeast Asia?

In fact, the recent surge of Mandarin in SEA is a development which has historical precedence. Namely, the spread of English in the region since the middle of the last century. If the recent surge of Mandarin is comparable to this past experience, perhaps seeing how the English language has managed to spread in SEA may help to suggest whether Mandarin will rise to become a second dominant foreign language in the region.

The Spread of English in SEA

ASEAN was founded in 1967. It has been pointed out that there is evidence to show that English was used among the officials of its founding member states (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) as their language of communication since the very early years of its inception.⁴ An ASEAN Charter was adopted by the ten members states of the bloc of nations (Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam, Lao, Myanmar, and Cambodia, in addition to the 5 founding members) in November 2007 and signed into law in February 2009. Article 34 of the Charter states that “The working language of ASEAN shall be English”.⁵

Nevertheless, we understand that neither all nor most of the ASEAN states were former colonies of the Great Britain or the United States of America. In other words, English had not been widely used in most parts of SEA historically. Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were colonized by France. Indonesia was the Dutch East Indies. And Thailand remained as a sovereign kingdom. Only Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore were formerly under British rule. And the Philippines was once a Spanish (since 1565) then US (1898-1946) colony. But even in the former British colonies, English was only used among the elites and there was not an extension of English education then and there. It means that for the general population of ASEAN, English was then alien to them. Perhaps only the Philippines was an exception. English was taught and adopted as the “medium of instruction for all schools” in the Philippine “public education system” as early as 1901. As a result, by 1918 “about 47.3%” of the Filipinos 10-year-old and above were “reported to be able to speak English and 55.6% able to read and write” that language.⁶

In spite of the situation in the Philippines, it is safe to say that on the

⁴ See Kirkpatrick (2010), pp. 9-10.

⁵ See THE ASEAN CHARTER on ASEAN website: www.asean.org.

⁶ See Gonzalez (1996), pp. 26-27.

whole the spread of English in SEA, historically, only started when the colonial period had ended. Hence, how did the language manage to spread and being used extensively in the region?⁷

It could possibly be first explained by how the status and function of the English language was/is perceived by the people of SEA, especially regarding its practical economic value. In the post-colonial period and thereafter, the common people in SEA may have come to realize that English is the language of commerce, business, finance, hi-tec industries and global communications. In other words, English is seen as a language that will enable them to gain access to modern science and modernity; a tool to bring up-to-date technology and introduce reform and transformation into their society. In short, English, by virtue of its strength, is believed to be a language that promises a better tomorrow for the people of the region.

Such a perception prompted the SEA countries to start teaching English in their public schools, as an elective or mandatory subject of their national curriculum. A study conducted in the first decade of this century shows that, English is being taught as the “first foreign language” in the schools of all the ASEAN states, except Singapore which even has it as the main “medium of instruction”. The language, moreover, is adopted as a curricular subject as early as in the primary school level, except in Indonesia which only started in secondary one. In Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines, English is not only being taught as the “first foreign language” but also used as a “medium of instruction” in schools for certain subjects. For examples, they teach mathematics and science in English.⁸

In the last two decades or so, we have also seen that the institutes of higher education in SEA are offering more courses and programs using English as medium of instruction, called EMI curricula. This development could be seen as resulting from an initiative to foster more students and staff mobility across the ASEAN universities, signified by the ASEAN Universities Network (or AUN, founded in 1995) and a more recent initiative (in 2008) to link up the “6500 higher education institutions and 12 million post-secondary students” in the region.⁹ Indeed, the AUN proclaims that the purpose of its inauguration is “to address the need for the region to quickly develop a regional identity and solidarity while promoting the fostering of ASEAN talents by creating a platform to allow the region’s leading higher

⁷ For a bibliography of the “key works” on English in Southeast Asia, see Chapter 20 of Low, E.L. & Hashim, A. (2012). This comprehensive list is compiled by Ee-Ling Low, Azirah Hashim, Ran Ao, and Adriana Sufun Philip.

⁸ See Kirkpatrick (2010), p. 63.

⁹ See Walkinshaw, I., Fenton-Smith, B. & Pamela Humphreys, P. (2017) and Kirkpatrick (2017b). In Fenton-Smith, B., Humphreys, P. & Walkinshaw, I (eds), *English Medium Instruction in Higher Education in Asia-Pacific: from Policy to Pedagogy*.

education institutions to collaborate”.¹⁰ A critical factor to ensure cross-borders collaboration, like freer movement among students and staff of the higher learning institutes in the region, could be made possible, is that there must be enough university courses taught in a common language. English emerges as the obvious choice to be that common language. This explains the rise of EMI curricula in the universities or tertiary institutions in ASEAN.

Making Mandarin a Language of Wider Communication in SEA: Prospects and Challenges

This brief sketch on the background of how English (albeit being a non-native language of the region) becomes an inter-national *lingua franca* of ASEAN, could perhaps serve as a point of reference for us to assess the possibility of making Mandarin another language of wide communication in SEA. In other words, we could use the historical factors which led to the rise of English in SEA as yardsticks to construct a basic comparative framework.

Firstly, regarding the perception of the status and function of Mandarin, it is conceivable that the Chinese language has begun to be perceived by many as a link to modernity and prosperity. China has become a major global player, if yet the indisputable leader, in innovation and manufacturing. In terms of manufacturing, the country is already a leader in quite a few key hi-tec industries which have the potential of becoming “the next normal” and define the future, such as clean energy. China is also a formidable competitor or rival to the US in the field of Artificial Intelligence, where the latter leads, or is still leading, the world. These developments perhaps have made many in the region to see that Mandarin today is comparable to English as a language of science and technology.

Secondly, we have also seen that Mandarin has started to be offered as an elective language subject in the national school curriculum of some SEA countries, such as Malaysia and the Philippines.¹¹ For example, in 2011, the Philippine government implemented a plan to offer Mandarin as an elective foreign language subject for students enrolled in her public high schools. In less than a decade, i.e. by 2019, about 11,000 students studying at 93 public high schools in the nation had opted to do the subject. Although this may testify that Mandarin has made inroad in this regard, it could still be very challenging for the language to gain new ground. This has to do

¹⁰ See AUN website: Why We Are Here | Discover AUN | ASEAN University Network.

¹¹ For a concise account on this development, see Neo, P.F. (2024b).

with the existing language-in-education policy of the ASEAN states.

The people of ASEAN speak a thousand or so languages. But the various SEA nations only designate a specific native language, among the many local tongues, to be their respective National Language, serving as the national *lingua franca*. This national language will be the main medium of instruction in schools. As mentioned, although some ASEAN states have had English alongside their national language as teaching medium, most have adopted the former as the assigned First Foreign Language in school curriculum. That is to say, the prevailing language-in-education policy of the ASEAN states could be seen as a 1 (national language) + 1 (foreign language, namely, English) model. However, teaching the national language and incorporating English instead of other local language(s) in the national curriculum have created a tension and given rise to a concern of the “push towards” or “embrace of” English and the adoption of a “defensive stance of linguistic nationalism”.¹²

As such, would there still be a space for the children or students in SEA to learn Mandarin as a Second Foreign Language in schools? Namely, to initiate a one national language plus two foreign languages, or 1 (national language) + 1 (English) + 1 (Mandarin), model for their national school curriculums? At issue is the fact that most of the local, or community and ethnic, languages, spoken by the people of the multi-racial varied communities all over the region of ASEAN are not being taught as a subject in school. These languages are essentially the mother-tongue or first language of a large sector of the citizenry. Naturally, the voices of these communal languages yearned to be heard, and their rights of survival are to be respected.

In short, although the importance of Mandarin has increasingly been understood by the people and governments of ASEAN, it would appear that there remain immense challenges for it to be on a par with English, in terms of becoming another language of wide communication in the region.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, by the early 2010s there was an observation that the children in Southeast Asia may “need to learn a regional *lingua franca*”, alongside their local language, national language, and an international language (English). And *Putonghua* (Mandarin) has been

¹² See Tupas, R. (2018). For linguistic nationalism, see Lee, H.G. & Suryadinata, L. (eds), 2007 and Sercombe P. & Tupas, R. (eds), 2014.

identified as a possible “regional lingua franca” for this developing trend.¹³ This could indicate that Mandarin does have the potentials to be more widely used by the people in SEA in the foreseeable future, if the economic ties between China and ASEAN would be further enhanced. Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the hidden hurdles of making a non-native language of the region, be it English or Chinese, to be a language of wide communication. Its aim is to point out that, when the practitioners and policy makers in the SEA region are working on the ground to promote the teaching and learning of Mandarin as a functional language, besides appreciating the local people’s aspiration to master a second foreign language, they should also be keenly aware of their affection for native languages.

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¹³ See Kirkpatrick, A. (2012), p. 22.

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