

The English language in the 'Asian century'

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Asia is seen as the future for the internationalisation of higher education, and the globalisation of English is enabling this future. Countries in Asia have therefore started to align their internationalisation strategies towards this Asia focus.

For example, Singapore's Minister of Education Heng Swee Keat concluded in his talk at the Singapore Management University on 16 February: "Asia is going to be a critical part of our future. The more we understand what is going on in Asia, the better our future will be. We must position ourselves as a global Asian hub that connects Asia with the world."

The internationalisation of higher education and the English language play a key role in Singapore's endeavour to become a 'global Asian hub' and to identify and create 'advantages that others find relevant'.

However, it seems that the internationalisation policies of countries and universities in Asia seldom question the global dominance of English and what consequences it may have for knowledge and scholarship building and the general well-being of Asian societies in the long run.

Let me now turn to a few interrelated issues to elaborate this problem further.

Scholars continue to raise questions related to the overemphasis on the English-only curriculum and the English-only mentality when it comes to what counts as valid knowledge and as legitimate intellectual sources in knowledge exchanges and knowledge production.

More and more (academic) knowledge is produced in English, while less and less is produced in local (Asian) languages, partly because publications in English are valued and seen as a desirable sign of intellectual integration.

Many scholars, including Asians, also admit that they have not tried to publish in Asian languages. Many others do not see the need to learn Asian languages for their academic work because they have many Asian students eagerly wanting to 'teach' them about Asia through the medium of English. Their engagement with Asia tends to stop at the surface, and I believe this can be improved.

The case of Japan

In a forthcoming article on the internationalisation of higher education, the role of English and national cultural identity issues in Asia, I analyse in particular Japan's Action Plan 2003 to 'Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities' and the 'Global 30' Project 2008.

The former endorses the critical role of English for Japan's advancement and integration, and notes the essential requirement for global communication through English language skills in the 21st century.

The latter aims to introduce English-medium programmes in Japan's top 30 universities to

partly promote Japanese higher education internationally, to provide access to English to Japanese students and to attract more international students to Japan.

One argument put forward in this article is that “the Japanese government’s policies to strengthen Japanese culture and identity through its English language education and the internationalisation of higher education are causing more concern regarding the government’s perceived identity crisis and a decreasing interest in Japanese universities from both Japanese and international students”.

What is more, while Japan has for a long time been paying more attention to minimising the potential of ‘losing’ the uniqueness of its national cultural identity through contact with English and the West under the pressure of globalisation, Japanese scholars have now warned the government and Japanese universities about something bigger and more fundamental.

Precisely, they point to over-reliance on English and the potential loss of knowledge production in Japanese and other Asian languages, should these languages not receive serious consideration at a national level.

Over-reliance on English

With the expansion of English-language programmes, courses, schools and universities across Asia as a part of the drive to become international hubs of education, innovation and scholarship, the over-reliance on English is becoming even more alarming.

In certain settings, students start learning in English at a very young age. It is more common, however, that students stop learning and being taught in their local languages once they enter university.

Many students and academics do not know how to present a topic in their local language because they do not know the norms, genres, styles, concepts, theories and vocabularies needed to perform such tasks. They become ‘illiterate’ and thus much less sophisticated in their own tongues.

One may also say that for many people in Asia, English is their native language and thus other local Asian languages are not necessarily their mother tongues and-or native languages; yet this group is still a tiny minority in the vast context of Asia.

This phenomenon has the potential to (re)produce an unequal and somewhat superficial engagement with scholarship under the banner of internationalisation that is largely driven by commercialisation, the overindulgence of English in government policies as well as a nation-building agenda that tends to take many shortcuts to English while undermining local languages.

After all, the international role of English does not have to result in the impoverishment of knowledge and scholarship in other languages, and this needs to be realised in policy and practice of the internationalisation of education and language policies across the Asian region.

Likewise, English is never going to entirely replace local languages. However, it will create



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a divide in local societies between those who use English and those who do not.

At the moment, the knowledge that circulates in the world of international education does so largely through the medium of the English language. It only indirectly touches those beyond the English-language world.

Part of the rationale for the internationalisation and globalisation of education is to make the world more equitable – that is, to allow people everywhere to have access to the same body of knowledge.

Does that rationale only apply to the English-language world? Or should policy-makers be thinking about how to move that equity beyond the language barrier, particularly in the context of the 'Asian century' and Asia-focused agendas worldwide?

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