

English language education in Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines: A Survey of Trends, Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

English has dominated the fields of arts, law, commerce, science, technology and education. Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines, co-members in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three, are not an exception to this global trend. These nations have made English entrenched in their education systems. What trends, issues and challenges make their English language education complex and complicated? What resolutions have been worked out to address them? More importantly, how can these three nations address these challenges in a more concerted effort? This study aims to shed light on these questions through a survey of classroom teachers representative of each country.

Key words: English language education, trends, issues

1. Introduction

In great strides, the English language has spread throughout the world, dominating a number of fields such as arts, commerce, science, technology and education. Three Asian countries are not an exception to this global trend - Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines. These three have included English in the school curriculum with the larger view that “it can contribute to students’ personal, linguistic, social, and cultural development” (Le, 2004, p. 167). In a post-colonial country like the Philippines, English was adopted as an official language and is still effectively functioning as a language of wider communication. Nations that were once hostile to foreign influence, such as Japan and Indonesia, are now giving English language education much greater priority in their foreign language policy (Tsui, 2004).

While their contexts vary widely in English language education, Philippines, Indonesia and Japan are not strangers to one another. The three countries are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three (ASEAN + 3), a regional organization that promotes intergovernmental cooperation and facilitates economic integration among its members. Being co-members, they have worked together in a number of political, economic and socio-cultural projects and policies to attain shared goals and interests. It becomes interesting to see whether they view language education a shared priority or even commit in helping each other address aspects of English language education.

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In this article, I take a survey approach by discussing, albeit briefly, the language education situations in Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines based on three considerations: trends, challenges and issues. Three teachers from each country, all with more than ten years of classroom experience, responded to an open-ended questionnaire that demands identification of each facet. In other words, the survey participants provided detailed information about trends, challenges and issues in English language education by drawing on their professional knowledge, existing realities and personal experiences. Some of the information they shared, as a matter of disclaimer, might not be applicable to all the areas within the country due to regional or school variations.

To make seamless the discussion, I begin with *trends*, broadly defined as current movements in English language teaching. A discussion of *issues*, or those debatable concerns that underlie trends, will follow. Subsequent to this is an examination of *challenges* surrounding these issues and the attendant *resolutions* aimed at addressing these challenges.

TABLE 1
Key trends, issues and challenges in Japan, Indonesia and Philippines

Country	Trend	Issue	Challenge	Resolution
Japan	assistant language teacher (ALT) system	native-speaker versus non-native speaker	co-teaching	employment of foreign non-native English speaking teachers
Indonesia	Ujian Nasional (national examination scheme)	washback	access	demoting the status of Ujian Nasional in university admissions
Philippines	mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE)	multiculturalism	assimilation of language teachers	in-service trainings

The nine survey respondents reported a wide range of trends, challenges and issues in language education that their respective countries grapple with. For purposes of brevity, though, I would limit my discussion on their most common responses, as reflected in Table 1 above.

This article ends on a pragmatic, if not optimistic, note. Given a long-standing history of exchange, I would like to propose two ways to address challenges in English language education that call for supranational attempts.

2. Discussion

2.1 Japan

Japan's initial contact with the English language began as early as 1600. Over time, much has changed in the ways English is taught and learned. A popular trend in Japan that has been going on for close to a decade is the Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) system. ALTs are foreign teachers, native speakers often, who are employed to teach side by side with Japanese teachers of English in public elementary and secondary classrooms. The Japan and

Exchange Teacher (JET) program of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) regulates this team teaching mechanism. Every year, the JET program dispatches hundreds of ALTs to public schools. The majority of the ALTs work for one year, in principle, and they have to return to their country of origin. A few are renewed every year, but the renewal lasts for up to three years only. However, as the coffers of local governments have begun to ebb away in recent years, many schools switched from JET program ALTs to those private companies outsource (Takahana, 2008).

According to the respondents, a key issue girdling the ALT system is the native - non-native speaker dichotomy, a debate that is prevalent in countries where English is used as a foreign language. Employment of ALTs is biased in favor of native speakers because of the belief that they are good models of English. In the employment process, the typical ALT is considered as the “white, Anglo, male” and so those who do not fall within this stereotype are perceived as non-native speakers (Amin, 1999).

The team teaching operation of the ALT system perpetuates this dichotomy. MEXT seems to perceive Japanese teachers of English as non-native professionals who are neither fluent in English nor competent to teach in English; for this reason, they need to be guided by native speaking ALTs (Browne, 2008). Furthermore, ALTs have less satisfactory eligibility criteria when considered for employment. The JET scheme requires ALT applicants to have a bachelor's degree in any area of study. Teaching experiences are considered optional.

A problem arising from the native - non-native speaker issue in the ALT system pertains to co-teaching. In various schools, the presence of ALTs has affected their local counterparts (Sutherland, 2012). A usual sentiment among the Japanese respondents in this study is that they serve as assistants to ALTs and not co-teachers. They were asked by ALTs to perform merely administrative tasks like photocopying materials, typing worksheets, scoring exams, and the like. There was a lack of sincere collaboration in planning and implementing a lesson. Thus, a common scenario in the classroom is that an ALT carries out a lesson while the Japanese teacher stands or sits by and watches. There are many reasons (e.g., cultural differences, poor ineligibility of ALTs) why co-teaching problems exist (Sutherland, 2012) but the driving force has been the superiority-inferiority conditions that are legitimated by the native speaker ideology.

Recently, MEXT has made some changes in the ALT scheme. Perhaps to sew the ideological gap between native and non-native speakers, English teachers from non-native English speaking countries have been accepted and dispatched to various private and public schools in recent years. The eligibility criteria remains unchanged but some liberty has been given to coordinating agencies in participating countries to adapt the criteria and employment process. The JET program in the Philippines, as a case in point, establishes eligibility criteria

higher than the standard requirements of the JET program such as obtaining a degree in English education, possessing a teaching license and having considerable teaching experiences. It remains to be seen, however, whether the acceptance of ALTs from “Outer Circle” (cf. Kachru, 1985) countries like the Philippines, Singapore, Jamaica and so on would remedy problems related to co-teaching.

2.2 Indonesia

Indonesia’s fixation with centralized examinations has been in the ground since the 80s (Choi & Lee, 2008). From 1980 to 2001, these examinations were called EBTRANAS (*Evaluasi Belajar Tahap Akhir Nasional*) or the National Final Evaluation of Students’ Learning, and then renamed to UAN (*Ujian Akhir Nasional*) or National Final Examination in 2002. The most recent re-labeling is in 2005, when the Ministry of Education changed it to UN (*Ujian Nasional*) or the National Examination.

The national examinations in English are administered to Grade 6, Grade 9 and Grade 12 students. In order to proceed to junior high school, sixth graders must be able to obtain 60% or above, while ninth and twelfth graders need to satisfy the 65% threshold to move on to senior high school and university, respectively. Passing the national examinations is a passport to junior high school, senior high school and university education. Students who fail in UN are required to do remedial classes in non-formal institutions, resulting in delays in graduation and further monetary costs. National examinations in English for sixth and ninth graders measure learners’ competencies in reading comprehension and grammar. Meanwhile, for twelfth graders, competencies in listening, reading and writing are measured, all of them via a multiple-choice test format.

One of the issues concerning the national examinations is its so-called “washback” . The Indonesian respondents remarked that the effects of the national examinations on teaching and learning practices are clearly observable. Instead of viewing the national examinations as an assessment tool for learning, the realities show that it has become prescriptive of the ways teaching and learning English are done (Setiono, 2004). For instance, English language textbooks tend to be examination-oriented. The contents of the books provide materials that teach the students how to solve or answer questions provided in the national examinations, rather than facilitate students’ skills to communicate.

A daunting challenge ensuing from this issue is access. One of the Indonesian respondents cited, as an example, the multiple-choice format used in the national examinations, which is adopted for ease of scoring that is needed especially in a very diverse archipelago like Indonesia. It has become a practice in many schools that the second semester of the school year in Grade 12 heavily focuses on reviewing the content and format of the national exams. For several months, rote memorization and rigid drills characterize the lessons, leading to a

kind of learning for examination success. Schools that have the human and material resources to provide memorization and drilling practices to students stand a higher chance in obtaining good test performance scores. In addition, outside of the schools, there are many coaching or cram schools set up for this purpose. Students who can afford to access these extracurricular test preparations are found to have better scores in the national exams. On the other hand, those students residing in poor regions in Indonesia, who do not have the means to take more preparations in cram schools, lag behind in test performance. Considering that national examinations are passports to access university education, problems of access will continue to flourish. The examinations, in many ways, have become prejudiced against schools with inadequate resources and students of lower socio-economic classes.

In an effort to alleviate the problem of unequal access to quality schools and exam tutorial centers, Indonesia's Ministry of Education has changed university admission procedures in 2014. Prior to this change, the sole determinant to enter universities is the national examination score. In 2014, weights are assigned to different tools. Thirty percent is given to school-based examination scores, 30% for national examination scores, and 40% for university entrance examinations. Criticisms of this policy change argue that while the status of national examinations has been downplayed, it does not remove the fact that Indonesians learn English to pass examinations. At the rate things are going on, the recent change has even pressured students to pass more than one examination.

2.3 Philippines

A major language education trend in the Philippines is the mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), a movement that has been going on in grassroots level for many decades across Southeast Asia. MTB-MLE was institutionalized on July 14, 2009 through Order No. 74 of the Department of Education (DepEd), superseding the country's bilingual education policy (English and Filipino as media of instruction). Order No. 74 is based explicitly on assumptions about the primacy of the use of mother tongues in education based on successful projects and empirical researches: the Lingua Franca Project of DepEd in 1999, the Lubuagan Experiment (Walter & Dekker, 2008) which showed that the educational performance of Primary 1-3 pupils taught in the local language outperformed those taught in English, and the DepEd study (Lim & Giron, 2010) which showed that pupils taught mathematics in their mother tongues performed relatively well in international tests. All these suggest that initial instruction in the learner's first language improves learning outcomes and reduces subsequent grade repetition and dropout.

On its implementation in school year 2012-2013, the DepEd established 12 major regional languages to be regarded as the "mother tongue" for learning in the first four years of a child's basic education. These languages are Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Iloko, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Waray, Tausug, Maguindanaoan, Maranao, and Chabacano. Later

on, seven languages were added: Ybanag for pupils in Tuguegarao City, Cagayan, and Isabela; Ivatan for the Batanes Group; Sambal in Zambales; Aklanon in Aklan, Capiz; Kinaray-a in Capiz, Aklan; Yakan in Autonomous Region Muslim Mindanao and Surigaonon covering Surigao City and provinces. The selection of these languages as “mother tongues” is based on their lingua franca status and the number of speakers that use it.

Lying at the core of MTB-MLE is the issue of multilingualism. With more than a hundred languages, the Philippines has always been a multilingual paradise. But for many reasons that are more political and economic than education, it took decades for stakeholders in language education to legitimize a reform that caters to the multilingual needs of Filipinos.

Contemporary patterns of communication and domestic migration have made multilingualism a way of allowing Filipinos to experience their rich multilingual backgrounds and as a means to thrive in a multilingual world (cf. Jessner, 2008). Giving Filipinos the proficiency in their mother tongues (L1), and the languages spoken by the larger communities (L2, L3, L4, etc.) is beneficial in increasing cognitive skills, humanistic understanding, learning achievement, economic benefits, linguistic abilities, social skills and political cooperation between groups.

Of course, multilingualism is not without its challenges. The three Filipino respondents noted that in the MTB-MLE context, a specific problem relates to the assimilation of language teachers to multilingual teaching. Prior to its implementation in 2012, there was a growing concern about the readiness of teachers to handle mother tongue instruction. The lack of preparedness demonstrates the chasm between the monolingual training that language teachers have undergone in their pre-service education and the multilingual teaching that they need to grapple with. In the life and work of current language teachers, multilingualism is an unfamiliar terrain to them because the multilingual and multicultural aspect in language teaching was given too little attention in their pre-service training. Their conceptual and theoretical understanding of multilingualism is limited because the models, pedagogical instruments and tools for evaluation in language teaching that they were exposed to contained visions of monolingual or bilingual learning and idealizations, such as considering the native speaker of a language as the norm.

As an antidote, DepEd has been providing in-service trainings to early grade teachers even before the MTB-MLE order was signed on 2009 (Nolasco, 2008). The trainings usually consist of topics such as strategies, assessment and materials development that are sensitive to the macro and micro settings of the communities. During the initial stages of implementation, these trainings were held under the auspices of Summer Institute of Linguistics International, St. Louis University and the 170+ Talaytayan MLE Inc. However, one of the respondents pointed out that although the in-service training seems to be already established, the pre-

service training appears to be slow and sporadic in keeping up with the demands of MTB-MLE. The respondent remarked language teacher education programs in teacher education institutions are bereft of long-term schemes that would incorporate the many aspects of multilingualism in theory and practice.

3. Implications

In view of these trends, issues, challenges and resolutions, what can these countries learn from each other? What insights can they gain from each other's experiences? And how can their language education systems move forward together?

The Philippine experience of MTB-MLE bodes well with Japan's lingering concerns about native speaking and non-native speaking teachers. Though Japan is not a multilingual country, it can draw inspiration from the ways in-service trainings are given utmost priority. In the Philippines, in-service trainings for language teachers work on the principle of "localization", the re-configuration of processes that is dependent on local contexts, practices, cultures and the understandings of the real (cf. Pennycook, 2007). They are taught ways to teach English that is free from the entanglements of a native-speaker orientation.

As having the most economically advantaged government among the three, Japan seems to be in a good position to invest on continuous and well-designed in-service trainings that would equip Japanese teachers with proficiency and skills to teach English in more localized ways. This kind of empowerment would emancipate the English language education system of Japan from over-reliance to native speaking English teachers. Currently, there is a professional development program in place called "lesson study", a popular approach in recent years (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999), in which teachers gather together to identify a problem, researches for solutions, designs a lesson plan, implements it and draws insights from it. However, it has been observed that this professional development scheme is common in mathematics and science subjects only.

Indonesia can also learn from the experiences of Japan and the Philippines, two nations whose concerns about language education have surpassed, to some extent, the national examinations. In Japan, young learners of English are not given any kind of standardized examinations until junior high school. In the Philippines, standardized examinations are administered in elementary and secondary levels, but they are diagnostic in purpose, and not as a privilege to access university education. Being the most diverse among the three, Indonesia needs to realize that to achieve uniform standards through standardized English language testing is tedious and costly, so it needs to reduce its fixation with national examinations and focus instead on attending to developing teaching and learning processes.

The Philippines, meanwhile, can gain lessons from those persisting issues that have beset

the language education systems of Japan and Indonesia. While native speaker preference and examination-oriented schemes have receded from common practice, residues of native speaker ideology are still happening in some parts of the archipelago. For example, on July 30, 2013, three high school students from a Christian school in Laoag, a city situated in the northern Philippines, were given notice that they had been expelled from the private school for violating the school's "English-only" policy. The students each received a letter from the school that read in part:

"After you have been warned by Pastor Brian Shah not to speak Iloko you still continued to defy his order. In view of this, you are advised to transfer to another school effective today July 31, 2013..[signed] Prof Cristeta A. Pedro, Principal." (Patria, 2013)

The expulsion of these students quickly became a hotly debated topic in the country. If anything, this goes to show that while English language education in the Philippines has been "norm-independent" (Kachru, 1985), there exist sporadic practices that keep alive the monolingual native speaker image.

Finally, Japan and Indonesia can pick up from what the Philippines has been doing for decades. To begin with, the Philippines' approach to learning English is much different from that of Japan and Indonesia, where English is seen as a subject in school. The relative success of English language education in the Philippines is due to its approach to teaching and learning English. Not only is English taught in schools but also the wider society is given a significant resource necessary for language acquisition: exposure outside the classroom. The role of exposure in learning a second language cannot be overemphasized. Exposure allows learners to experience the language in real situations that, in return, provides some amount of reinforcement.

Earlier herein, I noted that Japan, Philippines and Indonesia share a common ground as members of the ASEAN + 3. Considering the heterogeneous variations in contexts, a feasible path to take is to create a framework of reference for English language teacher education, akin to what the European Union is currently mapping out (cf. Ziegler, 2013). The framework has to consider principles on models, bilingualism or multilingualism and assessment that these countries can utilize for development, monitoring, supervision and benchmarking purposes.

Since teachers are very crucial, another supranational initiative that may be worth considering is to have a pre-service student teacher exchange. This undertaking can provide opportunities for pre-service student teachers from universities in Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines to undergo practicum in schools in these countries. A project like this would enable pre-service student teachers of English to develop their teaching skills and pedagogy,

to practice their communication skills in English and to gain a broader regional and world milieu.

4. Conclusion

By far, what I have shown in this paper are specific trends, issues and challenges that Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines considerably contend with. These are based on survey responses of nine teachers working in schools situated in these countries. In the interest of fairness, it has to be pointed out that specific actions have been made to address them. However, the government measures that I have discussed above can only do as much, due to a confluence of many complicated factors.

Nonetheless, there is always hope in concerted collaboration. Using the ASEAN + 3 as a platform, these three countries can move forward to create a better English language education for its citizenry.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire on Trends, Issues and Challenges in English language Education

Name (to be withheld): _____

Country of residence (please check): Japan Philippines Indonesia
Years of teaching English: 1-5 years 6-10 years more than 10 years

Direction: Please answer the questions as honestly as possible. If the space is not enough, kindly use another piece of paper.

1. What patterns of practice in English language teaching currently exist in your country? Kindly explain your answer using facts or personal experiences.

2. What significant debates or discussions arise from these patterns of practices? Kindly explain your answer using facts or personal experiences.

3. What difficulties, on conceptual or practical level, are brought about by these debates or discussions? Kindly explain your answer using facts or personal experiences.

Thank you very much.