Learning English and other languages in multilingual settings: principles of multilingual performance and proficiency.

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As Clyne and Sharifian point out, more than one billion people now use English as second or additional language, 'largely to communicate with other second language users with whom they do not share a cultural and linguistic background' (this volume p 1). In this essay I want to discuss the teaching and learning of English by these multilingual users, and consider the challenges that the desire to learn English places on the learner and the curriculum. My context will be on schools in the Asian region and my focus will be on the relationship between English and local languages in the school curriculum. Is, for example, the relationship between English and local languages complementary or competitive?

While we may debate whether English is really as important for all as is claimed, the widespread demand for English is here for the foreseeable future. Without exception, Ministries of Education throughout East and Southeast Asia have decided that English is a vital skill that must be learned by their citizens from as early an age as possible, if their respective countries are to modernize and to be able to participate in today's globalised world.

This essay is an attempt to consider ways in which English might be taught which would help maintain and nurture the child's mother tongue as a basis for the acquisition of multilingualism on the one hand, and allow the child to develop an understanding of English as a pluricentric language on the other. This will not be easy. As will be illustrated below, the perceived need for English along with the need to learn the national language and/or a regional lingua franca commonly presents a serious threat to mother tongues and local languages, especially those which are spoken by a relatively small population and which have no script. The early introduction of English also places extreme linguistic and cognitive demands on children, especially when the classroom model remains an idealised native speaker model against which the learners' performance is measured.

Benson (2008 pp 2 ff) identifies three myths, acceptance of which routinely bedevils language learning and the maintenance of the mother tongue. These three myths are:

(i) 'the best way to learn a second language is to use it as a medium of instruction';

(ii) 'to learn a second language you must start as early as possible';

(iii) 'the home language gets in the way of learning a second language'.

In the next section of this essay, I shall consider each of these myths in turn, and provide specific examples where acceptance of them has been realised in language education policy and the teaching of English.

Several educational systems accept the first myth, as English is used in many countries as a medium of instruction. For example, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines teach maths and science subjects through English from primary school (Jones 2007, Gonzalez 1996). In the case of Malaysia, in a reversal of the Malaysianisation policy under which Malay was the medium of instruction, maths has been taught through English from primary one since 2002 (Gill 2007). Singapore also uses English as a medium of instruction from primary 1, but for all subjects. English is therefore *the* medium of instruction in Singaporean schools. In Hong Kong, some 25% of *secondary* schools are English medium. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of Hong Kong's *primary* schools retain Cantonese – the mother tongue of the overwhelming majority of the population – as the medium of instruction.

Despite its popularity, the use of a second language as a medium of instruction in the early years of primary schools is not recommended by experts. It is agreed that *at least* five years of instruction in the second language is needed before children can learn academic concepts through that language, (Benson 2008, Cummins 1999). With regard to the teaching of maths through English, the Filipino scholar Bernardo is unequivocal,

'there seems to be no theoretical or empirical basis…to obligate the use of English in teaching mathematics', and that,

'there are clear and consistent advantages to using the students' first language…at the stage of learning where the student is acquiring the basic understanding of the various mathematical concepts and procedures' (Bernardo 2000: 313)

The second myth states that the earlier English is learned the better. This may be true, all things being equal, but things very seldom are equal in the contexts which we are

describing. If there are qualified, proficient and committed teachers, if there are excellent facilities and materials, and if the child already has literacy in the mother tongue, then learning an L2 early can indeed be beneficial. But in most contexts in Asia, there are seldom sufficient teachers, materials or facilities to justify the early introduction of English, even as a subject, let alone as a medium of instruction. All too often the perceived demand for English sees it introduced too early and taught by teachers with low levels of English proficiency and who have access only to inadequate materials. This early introduction of English is often at the expense of literacy in the child's mother tongue. Rather than introducing English in such circumstances, a wiser long-term investment would be to ensure that the child first achieves literacy and fluency in the mother tongue, as the L1 knowledge then acts as a bridge to L2 and L3 literacy and learning. Far from the home language getting in the way of learning a second language, as claimed in the third myth listed above, the more investment in the child's first language there is, the more successful the acquisition of a second and third language will be. Children are able to transfer the L1 skills they have learned to L2 learning (Benson 2008, Cummins 2008). Thus, support for the L1 is a crucial principle in the successful Canadian immersion bilingual programmes (Swain and Johnson 1997).

Given the widespread demand for English, how might English best be taught in schools in East and Southeast Asia? I here propose replacing the three myths with three related principles.

The first principle is that the child's first language should be the language in which the child learns. English should only be introduced in the earliest years of primary schools when conditions allow. This, at the very least, means there need to be sufficient proficient and trained teachers and suitable materials. Most importantly, it should be introduced only as a subject. If these conditions are not met, the teaching of English needs to be delayed. There is no reason why children cannot successfully learn a language if they start learning later in the curriculum.

The second principle is thus to delay the introduction of English until the child has literacy in the first language, and conditions and facilities merit it. Introducing English too early either as a subject or especially as a medium of instruction will adversely effect the development of the child's LI. 'The danger is for education programmes to focus on the L2 and L3 without building on a strong L1 foundation' (Benson 2008:9). In Singapore, where English is the medium of instruction and the ethnic languages, Chinese – although this is actually Mandarin (Putonghua) rather than a local dialect of

Chinese – Malay and Tamil, are taught as subjects, there is now concern that many ethnically Chinese students are graduating from secondary school without being literate in Chinese. It is therefore ironic that Singapore is often considered to have adopted a successful language policy based on the relative proficiency *in English* possessed by most Singaporeans. Compare this with Hong Kong, where the home language of the great majority of the children, Cantonese, is the medium of instruction in almost all government primary schools and where English is taught as a subject. This allows the children to develop literacy in Chinese at an early stage. The special cognitive demands of learning the Chinese logographic script means that it takes two and a half years longer for a child to become literate in this than it does for a child to become literate in an alphabetic language (Chen Ping 1999, Taylor and Taylor 1995). In prioritizing literacy in Chinese in Hong Kong's primary schools, the Hong Kong government is ensuring its children inherit an invaluable 'birthright'. And in making Cantonese the medium of instruction in primary schools, it is supporting and validating the child's L1 and sense of identity. It could be argued that a language policy that sees its citizens literate in Chinese and with some proficiency in English is more successful than one which sees its citizens fluent in English, but illiterate in Chinese.

To move now from when to introduce English to what type of English to introduce, Clyne and Sharifian ask whether non-native varieties of English and non-native but intelligible pronunciation can be accepted as standard (this volume). One of Kachru's great contributions has been to demonstrate the plurality of Englishes (cf. 1982, 1992) and where there is a local variety of English which has been codified, there is no reason, other than social acceptability, why the local variety should not provide the classroom model. It is important to note, however, that social acceptability can be some time coming (Schneider 2003), as Australians know only too well (Delbridge 1999). Nevertheless, the educated varieties of Singaporean and Filipino English, for example, could provide the linguistic benchmarks for Singaporean and Filipino children. By the same token, trained Singaporean and Filipino English language teachers should not only be *role models* for their learners but also *linguistic models*. The native speaker model, which is based on monolingual performance, is replaced by a performance model derived from a relevant multilingual speaker. This requires a shift of paradigm from the traditional second language acquisition perspective which sees the target of second language learning as native-like proficiency (cf. Firth and Wagner 1997, Jenkins 2006). Instead we need to consider language acquisition in the context of complex multilingual settings, where it may be difficult for speakers to be able to identify which is their first and which is their second language. Language

contact is seen as natural and inevitable. Multilinguals who speak many languages will naturally sound multilingual. An individual who speaks four languages will not sound like four different native speakers. The third principle, therefore, is that multilingual performance and proficiency should be adopted as the language learning goal, not idealized native-like proficiency.

In many of the multilingual nations and region of Southeast Asia, English is commonly used as a lingua franca. Following the third principle, where English is used primarily as a lingua franca it should be taught as a lingua franca. This would see the following implications for English language teaching in the region. First, international intelligibility becomes a more important goal than the acquisition of a pronunciation model based on native speaker and monolingual performance (Jenkins 2000). The successful multilingual user of English provides a more relevant and attainable 'model' of English. L1 influence on the speaker's English need not be seen negatively as 'interference', but positively, as evidence of a multilingual speaker. L1 influence can, in any event, heighten the speaker's international intelligibility, especially if the speaker's L1 has a tendency to syllable timing, as is the case for many African and Asian languages (Deterding and Kirkpatrick 2006, Hung 2002). Multilingual English teachers (METs) thus become seen as more relevant and appropriate than native English teachers (NETs). The local, well-trained and highly proficient English-knowing multilingual English language teacher is now seen as possessing the linguistic skills, resources and language variety most useful for the regional English language classroom.

Acceptance and adoption of the multilingual performance principle would lead to significant changes in ELT pedagogy. For example, a monolingual pedagogy, whereby it is argued that only English should be used in the English classroom, would be replaced by a multilingual pedagogy, whereby the teacher is encouraged to use the linguistic resources of the teachers and learners to facilitate the learning of English. The LI has an important role to play in explaining and comparing linguistic concepts including lexis, structures and cultural conventions as can the principled use of translation. The LI can be used as a bridge to English language learning in ways that include using stories written by the child in the child's LI to produce the same story written in the L2. As Cummins (2008:65) argues,

> 'Translation has a role to play within a broadly defined communicative approach as a
> means of enabling students to create multimedia texts that communicate in powerful
> and authentic ways with multiple audiences in both L1 and L2'

Teaching English as a lingua franca would also see significant changes in ELT curricula and materials. For example, the English language classroom would provide a cross-cultural learning environment, as lingua franca speakers need to know about the cultures of the people they are likely to be communicating with. At the same time, they need to be able to discuss and describe their own cultures and cultural values to other people. Thus, in the ASEAN context, students can learn about, and learn to talk about, regional cultures through English (Kirkpatrick 2007a, 2002).

Regional lingua franca speakers would become commonly represented and *heard* in English language teaching materials. One example where this is already happening is at the Far East University in Vladivostok where Russian students of English use materials which familiarise them with the English spoken by Chinese, Japanese and Korean speakers (Proshina 2005). This raises the interesting question of cross-cultural communication and pragmatics. In these multilingual contexts, the pragmatics preferred by the English users may conform more to the cultural norms of their first language. This, for example, Asian lingua franca users of English may well feel more comfortable forming requests by providing prefacing the request with a number of reasons and justifications for it, as is common in Chinese (Kirkpatrick 1991) and other Asian speech styles (Scollon and Scollon 1991). They may feel more comfortable using forms of address that conform to their own cultural norms and wish to avoid the feeling of 'pragmatic dissonance' caused by adopting Anglo cultural norms which violate their own cultural norms (Li 2002:580). The transfer of the pragmatic norms of the L1 to a speaker's variety of English is a natural way of adapting English to the speaker's own cultural norms (Sharifian 2006).

For the same reason, local literatures in English can become important and valuable teaching materials. A striking example of this comes from a Filipino secondary syllabus for English literature, which chooses literary texts based on the following grade year themes:

S1: 'I am a Filipino'
S2: 'I am an Asian'
S3: 'I am an English speaker'
S4: 'I am a citizen of the world'

In summary, the adoption of the multilingual performance principle to English promotes and validates the multilingual. It focuses on regional and international

communication. It draws on the learner's LI to achieve competence in English. It uses local multilinguals, cultures and literatures in teaching materials. It recognizes that the local trained multilingual English language teacher provides a more relevant, appropriate and attainable variety of English than the native English speaker. The move is from a monolingual restrictive ideology to a multilingual liberating ideology.

In the preceding discussion, ways have been described in which English could be taught in East and Southeast Asia given the development of Asian varieties of English and its major role as a regional lingua franca. The fact is, however, that in the great majority of Asian educational systems, it is not taught in these ways. On the contrary, the privileged position of the native speaker model and the native speaker teacher remains entrenched, while the local variety of English and the local teacher's model are negatively evaluated, not least by the locals themselves (Jenkins 2007). Linguistic benchmarks for the English language classroom remain derived from the native speaker model (Kirkpatrick 2007b). Not surprisingly, therefore, the native speaker remains highly sought after in Asian language classrooms, both as model and teacher, so much so that it is commonplace to find English teachers employed solely on the grounds that they are native speakers of the language. That is to say, they are employed as English language teachers even when they have no teaching qualifications, often at the expense of local and suitably qualified English language teachers.

At the same time, as reported above, most educational systems in the region introduce English into the primary classroom, sometimes as early as in primary one and sometimes as a medium of instruction. This seriously disadvantages the poor and those without access to English. Success in content subjects – and in education itself – is dependent upon success in English (Graddol 2006:120). While using a national language as the medium of instruction is greatly preferable, when the child's L1 is not the national language, the linguistic and developmental burden this places on the child is even greater, especially when no support is given to the child's mother tongue. Some systems allow instruction in the child's mother tongue for the early years of primary school, typically switching to the national language in primary three, but these programmes are ad hoc and there is no guarantee that a child can learn though the mother tongue in many contexts. Some governments – and Cambodia and Vietnam are examples – have inclusive education *policies* which respect the linguistic rights of ethnic minority groups but these are not often implemented (Haddad 2008). In Vietnam, for example, while the government has worked with UNESCO and other NGOs to develop scripts for several of Vietnam's ethnic and minority languages, this

has not, to date, proved effective in attracting minority groups to schools, as literacy in the mother tongue has been used primarily to teach the children Vietnamese. Indeed Vietnam provides a good example of how pressures to learn the national language along with regional and international lingua francas means that local languages are in serious danger of dying out. Vietnamese, the language spoken by over 80% of the population as a mother tongue is the medium of instruction. The foreign language curriculum is now dominated by English with over 90% of children learning it (Baker and Baker 2003). The other languages taught include Putonghua and French and the French francophone agency AUPELF has the ambitious goal of 5% of Vietnamese secondary school students graduating through a French-Vietnamese bilingual system (Wright 2002).

Typically, therefore a child in Vietnam will learn through Vietnamese as a medium of instruction and also learn English and either Putonghua and/or French. Given that these languages are not cognate and, while Vietnamese now has an alphabetic script, it is different from the English/French scripts and that Putonghua has a logographic script, the linguistic demands this places even on the LI Vietnamese child are challenging to say the least. If the child comes from one of the ethnic minorities, the challenge is even greater. Indeed it is likely that such children will drop out of school at an early age. Less than 7% of Yao and Hmong children remain in school (Thaveeporn 2003).

The pressure to learn the national language, Putonghua and English is common in educational systems in Asia. The perceived need for these languages is tied to globalization and modernization. A national language is seen as essential for national unity; Putonghua is seen as increasingly important as China's economic and political power increases; and English is seen as essential as the language of modernisation, knowledge transfer and international communication. The importance of a language is currently measured its cultural capital of which linguistic capital is a part (Bourdieu 1986). These are highly instrumental motivations for language learning (Rappa and Wee 2006). While such instrumental motivations remain strong, the future for local languages which are neither national nor which act as lingua francas appears extremely bleak. Unless education systems accept that the three myths outlined at the beginning of this essay are indeed myths – and the evidence strongly suggests that these myths are still considered uncontestable truths by most systems – we would predict that many local languages will soon die out. While a new multilingual performance approach to the teaching and learning of English may help validate and promote the local English-knowing multilingual speaker, there is also little evidence

that this approach is being adopted in East and Southeast Asia, where the native speaker and the native speaker model remain highly privileged. It is all the more important, therefore, that applied linguists constantly challenge the myths outlined at the beginning of this essay, while at the same time promoting a pluralist approach to English language teaching. Replacing the three myths with the following three principles would help retain local languages on the one hand and validate and promote multilingualism on the other:

(i)   wherever possible, the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction; otherwise a local language should be used;

(ii)   English can happily be delayed until at least the later years of primary school;

(iii) the goal of learners of English in multilingual and lingua franca settings should be multilingual performance and proficiency, not an idealized native-like proficiency.

[Approx 3500 words]

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