

ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LITERACY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The English language has been a global means of communication for a long time; for historical, political and economic reasons. Southeast Asia is one of the regions in the world where a large number of languages are spoken.

A common platform is needed for the intensification of intra-Asia exchanges, which will make the region more dynamic economically and culturally. The question is whether individuals, companies and countries in this region could keep up with the increasing demand for more and better English.

Even as the importance of English rises, proficiency in much of Asia remains poor. Standards seem to be falling even in former British colonies such as Malaysia. Despite the various efforts and support from the governments in many Asian countries to promote English, there has been little improvement.

Most Southeast Asian nations are multiracial, multilingual and multicultural. The diversity of population in each and its geographical distribution affect the patterns of English language acquisition and use among the school-going populace.

Though the use of English enables these countries to achieve economic growth and rapid socio-cultural transformation, it also threatens their national identity. This fundamental issue needs to be addressed if progress is to be seen.

The implementation of an English language policy is observable in Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. Scholars who have been devoting their research and practice to English as an important second language in these countries may well begin paying some attention to less researched regions such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

Let us take a look at the efforts by various types of organisations to improve the use of English in some of the countries in Southeast Asia:



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Malaysia

A good example of how the private sector can help to improve the use of English is the Click into English joint-effort programme by Nestle Malaysia and British Council with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education. The purpose of the web-based programme is to bring English to rural schools in a fun and interesting way. Pilot projects have been launched in two states, Kedah and Terengganu. Efforts are being made to launch the programme nationwide.

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Vietnam

A group of Vietnamese students in the United States formed the Vietnam Culture Development Society, a non-profit organisation to promote English literacy in Vietnam. The organisation collects books, journals and school supplies and sends them to those who need it in Vietnam. The organisation hoped to create opportunities for the new generation of Vietnam to reach out to the world and look at what their peers in other countries are doing and achieving.

Philippines

In 2005, a project called Promoting English Proficiency (PEP) was initiated by the Makati Business Club's Philippines-US Business Council and the American Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines. The project aimed to improve English proficiency among teachers, students and the workforce, with the belief that better grasp of English would attract foreign investors and prepare Filipinos for the global workplace.

PEP conducts training using a blended approach of classroom teaching and computer-aided instruction. There were to be 50 computerised English language centres with 250 teachers and 42,000 students trained by last year.

There are various forms of collective efforts either between the countries in Southeast Asia or with countries outside the region. The above efforts highlight how various forms of organisations (government, private sector and non-profit) could work towards promoting English among various levels of population (from students to working adults), regardless of their location (urban or rural), thereby improving the English language proficiency of people from all walks of life. **TCX**

Singapore

Although Singapore is considered a success story in Southeast Asia, the use of good English among its general population is a major concern. Thus, the Speak Good English Movement was launched in 2000. It encouraged those who spoke good English to become activists and role models to those who did not.

Brunei

The country's Ministry of Education is planning to implement a "Reading Recovery Programme" to improve English literacy among its students nationwide. The project's primary goal is to prepare both teachers and students for a new educational system and to make reading a culture. The project is also aimed at improving the level and skill of language understanding, leading to increased self-confidence among students.

Thailand

English is being taught in rural communities through international voluntary service and educational projects. For example, a project was begun last year in Ubon Ratchatani by the Pitaya Suwan Foundation (PSF), which is a charity organisation working in the field of community development and intercultural learning. Ubon Ratchatani is a city in northeast Thailand's Isan region, which is among the most traditional, poorest and least developed areas in the country. Volunteers are sent to rural areas to learn about Isan culture, visit villagers, farmers and local artisans, help them in their tasks occasionally, and hold English workshops for their children.