

**Towards Dehegemonizing the English Language:
Perspectives of a “Center” Researcher Working in the Periphery**

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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point the phrase “towards dehegemonizing the English language”, used in the rationale for this conference and workshop. The presentation draws on the insights of Southeast Asian scholars including Tupas (Unequal Englishes), Lorente (the grip of English and Philippine language policy), and Noor Azam (It’s not always English: Duelling aunties in Brunei Darussalam). Noting with approval these examples of ‘periphery’ scholars writing back and exploring the ways in which English has become an Asian language, I offer examples of mixed and unmixed language use in language and content classrooms for collaborative analysis with the audience, and other spoken, written and social media texts for comparison and contrast. These should enable us to explore

- whether classroom language use reflects the world outside
- whether we can move towards a more accommodating multilingual model
- whether this can help us to view local and global languages as complimentary

The conclusion suggests a reconceptualization of Applied Linguistics, and supports the development of theories arising from Southeast Asian multilingual contexts.

Keywords: Dehegemonizing, English, language classroom interaction, MTBMLE

Introduction

Multilingual Southeast Asian nations offer scope for studies of language contact between ‘global’ languages, national and official languages, and minoritised languages. Traditionally the nations belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are divided into

- those where English as a former colonial language has intranational functions: The Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam and Singapore, and
- those where English is mainly used internationally: Myanmar, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia.

This division corresponds to the “outer circle” and the “expanding circle” in Kachru’s (1985) model of the three circles of World Englishes. Kachru’s model has been challenged and revised to allow for the possibility of porous circles, through which any user of English anywhere can enter the “inner circle”, which was formerly the preserve of so-called native speakers from countries where English is a first language (USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). In the revised model the circles are based on proficiency rather than on geographical or national qualifications. The “inner circle” nations

can be alternatively defined as belonging to the “centre”, whilst other formerly colonised nations form part of the “periphery”, in Galtung’s imperialism theory as used by Phillipson (1992: 52-53) to describe processes of “linguistic imperialism”. Despite having taught English and other subjects at secondary and tertiary levels in Southeast Asia, mainly in Malaysia and in Brunei Darussalam, since the late 1970s, I still position myself as a “centre” figure because of my British origins and upbringing. This does not, however, prevent me from acknowledging and respecting the standpoints taken by those from “periphery” nations in Southeast Asia.

“Dehegemonizing” English in Southeast Asia: Tupas, Lorente, Noor Azam

For the purposes of this paper ‘hegemony’ is more than just the dominance of English, it is the unquestioned acceptance of English as the global language. ‘Dehegemonizing’ therefore can be defined as actions taken to prevent English from dominating and threatening other national, official and local languages.

Tupas (2015) develops the concept of “unequal Englishes” as a framework for investigating whether the varieties of English of the “centre” nations are more highly regarded and esteemed than those of “periphery” nations such as Filipino English: “because speakers of Englishes are rooted in their own identities, ideologies and social positionings, these Englishes are unequally valued, with some more powerful than others.” (p. 15).

Lorente (2013) discusses “the grip of English on Philippine language policy” and suggests that the policy “is anchored in the widespread and widely accepted but decontextualized belief that English is neutral and beneficial.” (p.188). She contends that the recent move towards implementing a national policy of Mother-tongue based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE) may help to loosen the grip of English, but fears that even this will not stop the unhealthy obsession that associates high proficiency in English with high achievement in education.

Malay and English are viewed as “duelling aunties” by Noor Azam (2012) in his discussion of Bruneians’ perceptions of the relationship between the languages in Brunei. Both are perceived by Bruneians as having high status, and thus they are in competition with each other. As a consequence the other indigenous languages of Brunei have been marginalised in discussion that “assume a homogeneous linguistic community that speaks Malay, having to fend off threats from English.” (p. 15).

One possible critique of the unequal Englishes, the grip of English, and the duelling aunties models, is that they presuppose conflict and tensions between ‘global’ English and local indigenous languages, and between English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and local varieties of English. Counterarguments, advanced by McLellan and Chua (2002, 2009) on the basis of evidence of language mixing (codeswitching, translanguaging) in both language and content-subject classrooms, point to collaborative negotiation for meaning between teachers and students, who draw on their shared multilingual resources in order to communicate meaningfully. We have to ask if there really are conflicts between English and national or official languages such as Filipino and Malay, between centre and local varieties of English, and between English and local vernacular languages. Perhaps notions of harmonious coexistence can more readily reflect the realities of classrooms under the current language-in-education policies: MTBMLE in the Philippines, and the Malay-English bilingual ‘*Sistem Pendidikan Abad ke-21*’ (Education System for the 21st Century, *SPN-21*) in Brunei Darussalam.

Applied Linguistics theory misapplied in two areas

Why is it that we look to the mostly monolingual and anglocentric ‘West’ for theories of Applied Linguistics? There may not be a simple answer to this question, but it highlights the illogicalities of theory development in our field of Applied Linguistics (as in other fields). Southeast Asia, including the Philippines and Indonesia, is highly multilingual and multi-ethnic, as is much of the rest of the world. Yet we persist in looking to the mostly monolingual USA, to mostly monolingual Europe and to mostly monolingual Australia, whenever we need theories to inform and give direction to our applied linguistic research.

This section of the article considers examples of irrelevant or “misapplied” linguistic theories (Cameron, 1994) in two related areas:

1] theories which drive misguided policies in language-in-education, especially selection of languages as medium of education at different levels;

2] theories of language learning and teaching which proscribe all use of learners’ and teachers’ shared first language (L1) in second-language classrooms.

In these two areas I firstly outline currently predominant theories and beliefs, then offer suggestions as to how Southeast Asian multilingual contexts might offer affordances for better, more readily applicable theories.

Language in education policy

In the post-colonial era, Southeast Asian nations have struggled to develop appropriate policies for determining which languages should serve as medium-of-instruction in their national school systems. Initially the choice was between retention of the colonial language (e.g. French or English), or a switch to the official or national language. Retention of the colonial language was termed “nationism” and the use of the national language “nationalism” by Fishman (1968). It is evident that former western colonial powers have exerted their influence in order to encourage the continued use of their languages both as compulsory subjects and as a medium of education (Phillipson, 1992, pp. 136-172). This applies to former British colonies and protectorates including Brunei Darussalam, Burma/Myanmar, Malaysia and Singapore; also to the former US colony the Philippines, and former French colonies Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. It does not apply in Indonesia, however, as the Dutch colonial authorities there made no attempt to encourage the spread of their language, preferring to administer the East Indies through ‘*Dienstmalaisch*’ (‘service Malay’), the precursor of *Bahasa Indonesia*, the present-day national and official language (Benjamin, 1988, cited in Rappa & Wee, 2006, p. 32; Collins, 1998, p. 57).

In Malaysia, following the formation of the nation in 1963, there was a gradual move towards the introduction of the Malay language (‘*Bahasa Malaysia*’) as the main medium of education in ‘national’ schools, whilst vernacular schools (termed ‘*jenis kebangsaan*’ ‘national-type’) were permitted to continue using Mandarin and Tamil. The transition to Malay-medium was completed during the early 1980s in Sarawak state in Borneo, the states of Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah having already made the switch earlier. The underlying aim was the promotion of national unity in a linguistically and ethnically diverse polity by giving all Malaysian school students access to education in the national language. In the early 1990s, as documented and discussed by Azirah Hashim (2009) and by Asmah Haji Omar (2012, pp. 163-166), there was a reversal of policy whereby tertiary-level science courses and programmes reverted to English-medium. Ten years later, with effect from 2003, the teaching of Science and Mathematics in government primary and secondary schools was changed back to English-medium. Six years after this, in 2009, there was yet another policy reversal, with

Science and Mathematics being taught through the medium of Malay with effect from 2012. The reasons for this latest policy change were principally political rather than educational. The (then) ruling coalition government wished to retain its support in rural areas where the majority of parents/voters are ethnic Malays with a preference for Malay-medium education, and the use of English-medium is problematic.

Other Southeast Asian nations, including Brunei Darussalam and the Philippines, have attempted to avoid the extreme polarities of nationalism and nationalism by developing bilingual medium-of-education policies which aim to produce students who are balanced bilinguals in English and in their respective national or official languages.

In the Philippines the national education policy of MTBMLE promotes the use of the pupils' first language (mother tongue) in the initial stages of their education when they are acquiring basic literacy, numeracy and oracy (Martin, 2015). This contrasts with Brunei's current SPN-21 policy (see below) which favours the use of English from the earliest ('*Pra-Sekolah*', pre-school) stages. Philippines policy is also problematic in its implementation, since the nation has around 200 languages that pupils may bring to school as their 'mother-tongue', and many of these are yet to be described fully in terms of their linguistic features. This makes it difficult for them to be used in learning and teaching contexts. As a result, many teachers in the Philippines revert to the use of Filipino (Tagalog), the national language, and English, often in defiance of the official policy, by subverting the MTBMLE policy, claiming that Filipino or English is the 'mother tongue'.

Negara Brunei Darussalam has been consistent since the introduction of the *Dwibahasa* (bilingual) Malay-English education policy in 1985, the year following the regaining of full independence from the United Kingdom. Under this policy all subjects were taught through the medium of Malay (officially 'Standard', as opposed the distinct vernacular Brunei Malay variety) in Primary years 1 to 3, with English as a subject only. From Primary year 4 onwards, the medium of education switched to English for academic subjects including Mathematics, Science, Geography, and initially History. History reverted to Malay-medium in the 1990s as a consequence of its being perceived as a subject closely connected to Bruneian culture and to the national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB, Malay Islamic Monarchy). The *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad Ke-21* (SPN-21, or 'National Education System for the 21st Century') was designed to supplant the *Dwibahasa* (bilingual) education system, and was introduced in 2009. The *Dwibahasa* system was criticized for being rather 'liberal' with the definition of 'bilingual' by placing more emphasis on the English language rather than on Malay. English was the prescribed to teach 'core' subjects such as Mathematics, Science and Economics at secondary level, but 'softer' subjects such as Art and Physical Education were taught in Malay. This imbalance was criticized as a reflection of how Malay language was deemed to be 'less important' compared to English. But the new SPN-21 curriculum, while applauded for placing greater emphasis on student participation and creativity, including offering international languages, has also been criticized for paying as little attention to Malay as did the *Dwibahasa* - hence, it is felt that the issue of imbalance has not yet been effectively addressed by educational language planners (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013: 15-18).

One possible cause of unease over the imbalance between English and Malay is the 'zero sum game' notion, which holds that more of one component necessarily entails less of another. This can be shown to be wrong in terms of an individual's or a community's infinite language acquisition capacities, as Bruneians who reach high proficiency levels in their second language, English, clearly do not lose their ability to communicate in varieties of Malay. However, school timetables, which allocate a certain amount of hours per week for the subjects taught through English and Malay, are finite and quantifiable,

so the zero sum game has some factual basis in terms of time allocation in school classrooms. This has caused concern among those who perceive the Malay language as being marginalized. Noor Azam (2016, p. 253, p. 264) argues cogently that the English-Malay imbalance under the SPN-21 policy is somewhat redressed by the requirement for all Muslim Brunei children (the majority of the country's population) to attend seven years of Islamic religious school. Most of the input in the "Ugama" (religious) schools is through the medium of Malay; they attend the religious schools in the afternoon after they have been to mainstream government schools in the morning.

MTBMLE cannot be said to be exclusively Southeast Asian, as its origins can be traced back to a UNESCO report on 'The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education' (UNESCO, 1953). Moves towards the promotion of MTBMLE have been taken up by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) through a series of conferences and publications, and the policy in the Philippines has been subjected to insightful critical analysis by, among others, Dayag (2012) and Martin (2012, 2015).

Classroom codeswitching or translanguaging

A second area in which Applied Linguistics theories have perhaps been 'misapplied' is the debate over the use or proscription of the teacher's and students' shared first language (L1) in the second-language (L2) classroom, especially where the L2 in question is English.

In their introduction to a volume on codeswitching in university English-medium classrooms, Barnard and McLellan (2014) note that in many parts of the complex multicultural world of the 21st century, people switch between languages on a regular, even everyday basis. For example, the Republic of Korea – until recently regarded as firmly mono-ethnic and monocultural – now has thousands of immigrant residents, mostly women and children, for whom Korean is an additional language and who have to adjust to an unfamiliar social and educational culture. In university contexts in a number of Asian countries, the perceived importance of English as *the* global language of communication, technology and business has led university authorities to promote the use of English as the medium of instruction, leading to growth in research in the field of English-medium education (EMI; Barnard & Zuwati, 2018). The pressure of such policies is felt by learners and teachers both within the universities and in other educational institutions where ESL (English as a Second Language) is taught as a subject, as well as used as the medium of instruction in other subjects in the curriculum.

The use of students' first languages in ESL language classrooms has tended to be disparaged by textbook writers, methodologists and educational policymakers in many countries. Consequently, the exclusive use of the target language has dominated English language teaching methodology for over a century, since the rejection in theory (but not usually in practice) of the Grammar-Translation approach, and its suggested replacement, successively, by the Direct Method, Audiolingualism, the Natural Approach and Communicative Language Teaching. Increasingly over the past two decades, however, there has been a resurgence of publications arguing that codeswitching in English language instruction can be socially, pedagogically and educationally valuable (e.g. Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2009; Swain, Kirkpatrick, & Cummins, 2011). Cook (2010) has argued that "translation can help and motivate students in a variety of pedagogical contexts ... (and) is suited to different types of teachers, and different ages and stages of students" (2010, p. xvii). More than twenty years ago, Widdowson (1994) argued that monolingual methods of teaching of English excessively privilege the status of teachers who are first-language users of English, a matter which has given rise to organisations and networks which have sought to redress this professional imbalance such as the Nonnative Speaker Movement (Braine, 2010). Translanguaging (Garcia & Li Wei, 2014) has been developed as a theory

for investigating and rationalising mixed language use by both learners and teachers. Thus, there are convincing reasons to explore the use of codeswitching in university classrooms, where English is either the subject (e.g. English for Academic Purposes), or the medium of instruction (e.g. a Human Geography course taught in English).

Macaro (2014) considers the directions that research into classroom code switching (CS) might take. He outlines three sets of beliefs that teachers may hold:

- the virtual position, in which all interaction takes place in the target, thus making the classroom like the world outside in the country or countries in which the target language is spoken.
- The maximal position, allowing for some classroom use of the L1 in cases where non-native speaker teachers (e.g. of English) do not have the required level of proficiency to use only the target language. Macaro (2014, p. 13) views this as a “Somewhat unhealthy deficit model”.
- The optimal position, which sees the value of classroom codeswitching, i.e. use of the L1, but also the dangers if this strategy is used in unprincipled ways.

The first example of mixed language use in a university classroom is from China (Tian, 2014, pp. 48-49):

[1]

01 T In this paragraph I noticed a strange word. In paragraph 9, literally. // have you seen this word before?

02 Ss {murmuring} Yeah.

03 T What's the meaning?

04 Ss {murmuring} 字面地 <literally>.

05 T Yes, 字面地 <literally>. right?....

Here the teacher shows acceptance of the use of Chinese by students by repeating the gloss for ‘literally’. This is a comprehension check which saves time and allows the teacher to establish that the word in the reading text is understood.

In example [2], from Brunei Darussalam, (Noor Azam et. al, 2014, p. 149), the teacher uses English only, but she allows the use of Malay, the shared L1, by the students:

[2]

05 T Okay. For your assignment you need to give me two examples of the sort of charitable activities they have done.

06 S2 You mean example like, they help rebuild a family's house from kebakaran, Miss? Example macam atu? <after a fire, Miss? Examples like that?>

07 T Yes. Helping to rebuild a family's house that was caught on fire or affected by the recent floods?

08 S2 Oh, okay. Thank you, Miss.

The teacher's feedback move in turn 07 demonstrates how the student could have given her contribution in English, without any explicit disapproval of the student's choice to codeswitch in turn 06.

Example [3] is from a Science class at a university in the Philippines (Martin, 2014, p.176)

[3]

01 T What's the main purpose of a valve? What? Dali! / Para hindi ano// <Hurry!!/So as not to >

02 S Para hindi bumalik yung// <So that it will not go back>

03 T Para hindi bumalik yung ano? <So that what will not go back?> So as to prevent what?

04 S xx <in Tagalog>

In this example the teacher herself initiates the codeswitching in turn 01 with a prompt to students to answer quickly, and a cue to generate the correct answer. She then repeats the students' correct response in turn 03 before reverting to English for her next initiation which is another display question.

There are important implications here for those teaching learners of all ages in all contexts. With very few exceptions, the university teachers represented in the case studies and commentaries in Barnard and McLellan (2014) believe that codeswitching serves valuable functions in their classes, and they use it for various reasons, and provide arguments in support of their beliefs and practices. If such arguments are academically and professionally convincing, it might encourage teachers in primary and secondary schools to evaluate their own beliefs and practices as to the value of the principled use of the learners' - and their own - first language in their own professional contexts.

For English language teachers, I would like to offer another 3-part framework which I believe is in harmony with that of Macaro (2014) cited above:

- Stage 1: codeswitching by teachers and learners OK for negotiation of meaning of new lexical items
- Stage 2: codeswitching by learners OK, but not by teachers
- Stage 3: codeswitching discouraged (use in emergency only)

Stage 1 might apply at pre-school and throughout the first six years of primary education, both in MTBMLE contexts and elsewhere. Stage 2 might be appropriate at lower secondary level, years 7 to 9, whilst stage 3 would be applicable at upper-secondary level from year 10 onwards, when students

should have reached a sufficient proficiency to comprehend and process higher-order knowledge.

But practical difficulties abound. What if the teacher does not share the same language(s) as the learners and thus cannot provide the home language support for all learners? What if learners in the same class have a multiplicity of home languages? What if the use of the shared L1 in L2 classrooms is not encouraged by national or local education authorities (ministries, or school inspectors)?

Conclusion

To conclude in general, Applied Linguistics represents an older model of Applied Linguistics as a self-contained academic discipline with the application of linguistic theory to language teaching and learning. Figure 1 represents an older model of Applied Linguistics as a self-contained academic discipline with the application of linguistic theory to language teaching and learning. Figure 2 represents an expanded role for Applied Linguistic theory, as applies across many fields of research, with the arrows breaking out from a porous broken-lined ellipse, beyond its earlier limited confines and western origins.

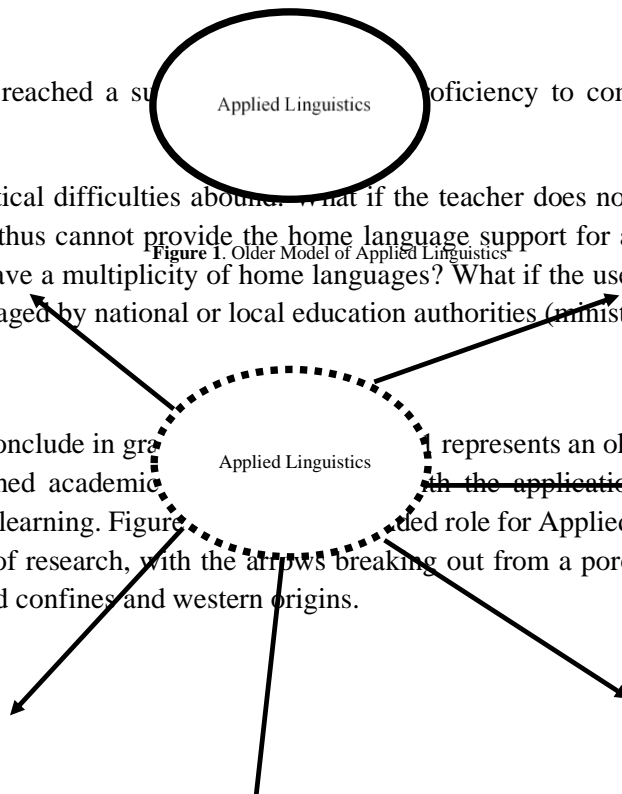


Figure 1. Older Model of Applied Linguistics

Figure 2. Expanded role of Applied Linguistics

We asked earlier why no major theoretical or methodological advances have yet emerged from Southeast Asian contexts. Maybe they have, but they have yet to become mainstream. The work of Heryanto (1990), who points out that the western notion of ‘language’ does not equate to the broader Malay/Indonesian concept of ‘Bahasa’, could serve as one starting point for theory development.

It could be the case that the paucity of theories emanating from Asian contexts happens because of inequalities of opportunity in the academic publishing business, whereby research studies in languages other than English are marginalised and count for little if anything in terms of journal and university rankings, citation indexes and impact factors, thanks to the pernicious Science-biased influence of the ISI, Scopus and similar commercially-driven enterprises. This could be another avenue

and agenda for further research, by those based in Southeast Asia, who are best-placed to campaign against such tyrannical publishing practices and against differential access to academic journals.

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