

# Mother Tongues matter amid English-language push in Asia

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British Council Senior Adviser [John Knagg](#) calls it “the global, suicidal run to early English” – the penchant of many education systems to prioritize English at the expense of other non-dominant languages, often children’s mother tongues.

It’s an issue that is particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, as countries belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) come together – and compete – in the early days of the [ASEAN Economic Community](#).

While respect for the “different cultures, languages and religions of all the peoples” is a founding principle in ASEAN’s [charter](#), that same document also specifies English as the grouping’s official working language. Underscoring this importance, ASEAN Secretary-General Le Luong Minh called English an “[indispensable tool](#) to bring our community closer together. ”

The [10 countries](#) that comprise ASEAN are home to more than 1,000 languages and many of these are minority tongues whose existence is already precarious – Indonesia alone has 143 entries in [UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger](#).

With English compulsory at the primary level in nine of 10 ASEAN countries (Indonesia the exception), experts argue that these languages could be crushed completely under the weight of policies that strive for inner-ASEAN competitiveness by adopting a “dominant language plus English” formula in education.

## ‘Native speaker’ debate

Naashia Mohamed, a lecturer with the Maldives National University’s Department of Linguistics, says that there is a strong push in her country for English to be introduced as early as possible to ensure children “sound like a native speaker”.

“And I think that attitude needs to change. In the Maldives, if you don’t speak with a native English speaker accent – which I think is impossible – you’re not a good English speaker,” she says. “Children end up not being fluent in either language.”

Dr. Mohamed says that the English-first policy extends to all areas of school life in the Maldives at the expense of the country’s dominant mother tongue, Dhivehi. “Even if you’re speaking about a personal problem, you need to speak in English,” she says. “As a result people will drop Dhivehi because English has become essential in everyday communications.”

Besides the fact that what passes for a “native” speaker accent varies considerably among countries, there is also the question of utility.

The number of multilingual users of English far surpasses the number of native speakers of the language and the way English is taught should reflect this, says Andy Kirkpatrick, Griffith University professor and expert in English and its use in Asia.

He supports the use of [English as a lingua franca \(ELF\)](#), whereby the aim is mutual comprehensibility in intercultural communication rather than adherence to native speaker norms. To do this effectively, he says, English must be delayed until children have fluency and literacy in their local and national tongues.

## ‘Rushing’ English language learning

Of course, many education systems are taking the opposite approach. Prof. Kirkpatrick says that this “rush” to ensure children are educated in English early is fueled in part by the false notion that the ability to acquire language diminishes with age. Not so, he says.

“There’s a kind of myth that you need to be a youngster to learn a language. That is simply not the case. [Adults are very good language learners](#). Age is not necessarily relevant.”

*The belief that early immersive exposure to English should be the goal has given rise to the use of English as the medium of instruction (EMI), an approach that runs counter to children’s best interests, says Education and Early Childhood Development Consultant Cliff Meyers.*

*He says that it’s “perfectly understandable” for parents to want their children to speak English to broaden their opportunities outside their own borders. “The trouble is that the distinction between English as a subject and EMI is too sophisticated to get across simply, so [governments and parents] are sold EMI as the solution whereas it is a part of the problem.”*

*His contention aligns with recent research into immersive education. In one of the [larger-scale studies](#) of its kind, researchers from Stanford University looked at the long-term academic progress of some 18,000 English-learner students in the San Francisco school system.*

*They found that over the long term, students taught in two languages surpassed their English immersion counterparts both academically and linguistically.*

*(California [recently repealed](#) legislation that effectively mandated English-only education in state schools).*

## **Discourse of despair**

*Prof Kirkpatrick says that concerns over mother language loss are compounded by the fact that current early English language instruction in Asia often proves ineffectual.*

*“There’s a kind of discourse of despair. If you travel around Asia, you will hear people say time and again, ‘You’re teaching English to these children for 10 years and they still can’t construct a single sentence in English,’ he says. “The reality is children are not learning English.”*

*The situation is particularly stark in rural schools, which are resource-challenged and where teachers often don’t have a firm grasp of the language.*

*Khaing Phyu Htut, English for Education Systems Manager for the British Council in Myanmar, said that while children in her country learn English from first grade, proficiency in the language is not high due in large part to teacher capacity. Feeding into this, she says, is a lack of pre- and in-service support as well as assessment that relies heavily on rote learning, disregarding the communicative aspects of English-learning.*

*Meyers notices the same issues throughout the region, saying that while “English fluency for all” can be a campaign crowd-pleaser for politicians, “the aspiration outpaces the reality of what’s happening in the field and teachers are the ones who suffer the most. They’re given incredible responsibility to teach a skill... when they themselves are not really capable and they don’t have a supporting environment.”*

*UNESCO advocates for literacy in the mother tongue to be given top priority before progressing on to a national language and, as Prof Kirkpatrick says, “then and only then move to literacy in English.”*

*“No one can say you should keep English away from children,” he says. “but you can have your cake and eat it.”*

*John Knagg, Andy Kirkpatrick, Naashia Mohamed, Khaing Phyu Htut and Cliff Meyers presented at the recent [5th International Conference on Language and Education](#) held in Bangkok, organized by the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group (MLE WG), comprising UN agencies, NGOs and academic institutions. The MLE WG was established to remove barriers to education faced by ethno-linguistic communities in Asia-Pacific.*