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ESL Assessment in South East Asia

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Introduction

South East Asia, officially organized into the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), comprises ten countries: Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei,

Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand. For the first four of these countries, English is an official language and is widely used. These countries, then, fall into Kachru's (1998) Outer Circle. In the other six countries which fall into the Expanding Circle, English is a foreign language and exposure to the language outside the education system may be limited. These differences in the role of English are reflected in English test scores by nationals of the various countries. The ETS (2009) scores for the TOEFL® iBT show Singapore (scoring 99), Malaysia (88) and the Philippines (88) all scoring higher than the Expanding Circle countries (Myanmar: 70; Laos: 60; Cambodia: 68; Vietnam: 70; Indonesia: 79; Thailand: 74; there are no TOEFL® iBT scores for Brunei). These figures need to be treated with caution as they are derived from a relatively small sample of possibly unrepresentative learners from each country, namely, those planning to study abroad. Nevertheless, other figures support this distinction between Outer and Expanding Circle countries. The Education First English Proficiency Index scores (Education First, 2011) are available for four of the countries, Malaysia as a country in the Outer Circle is rated as having high English proficiency, whereas the Expanding Circle countries - Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand - all have very low English proficiency. It would therefore appear that the roles of and proficiency levels in English in ASEAN fall into two main groups by country. To provide an overview of English language assessment in South East Asia, therefore, rather than looking at assessment practices in all ten countries, we will examine assessment practices in depth in two countries, namely, Thailand and Singapore, as exemplars of the groups of countries. Given that English is a foreign language in Thailand but for many Singaporeans it is a first language, we should expect some differences in assessment

practices. However, as both countries are members of ASEAN, there may also be some similarities. We will also provide an overview of assessment practices in a further three countries to see whether patterns identified in the two exemplar countries apply in these countries.

English language assessment in Thailand

Assessment and testing are major issues of concern in Thai education. Of the 75 news articles about education in the *Bangkok Post* in 2009 and 2010, 34 (45%) concerned assessment. The majority of these concern conflicts between emphasizing validity or reliability in national assessment practices and have implications for the assessment of English, since the language is a required subject in national education tests taken at grades 6, 9 and 12 and in the separate university entrance exam.

At the highest level of policy, educational assessment in Thailand is fairly progressive. The National Education Act of 1999 (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999), which guides Thai educational decision making, promotes learner-centered education and, in Section 26, addresses assessment:

"Educational institutions shall assess learners' performance through observation of their development; personal conduct; learning behaviour; participation in activities and results of the tests accompanying the teaching-learning process commensurate with the different levels and types of education. Educational institutions shall use a variety of methods for providing opportunities for further education and shall also take into consideration results of the assessment of the learners' performance."

Such ideals, however, bear little relationship to educational practice. The continuous assessment practices suggested in the Act are rarely used, especially in high-stakes evaluation, with most assessment taking the form of multiple-choice tests. This is best illustrated by the university entrance exam system, the most influential assessment in the country. The importance of the entrance exam is highlighted in a survey of the problems faced by 156 secondary school English teachers (Thongsri, Charumanee & Chatupote, 2006). Problems identified included the lack of community support for learning English, students' low ability, large class size, extra work, and insufficient teaching aids. Despite the apparent potential seriousness of these problems, the problem rated as most serious by a very wide margin was the influence of the university entrance examination.

The national university entrance exam system started in 1967 using exams consisting exclusively of multiple-choice items as the sole criterion for selecting candidates for university. By the late 1990s, pressure to change this system came to a head. In 1998, the exclusive reliance on exam scores stopped as marks from secondary school performance were included for the first time. Initially, secondary school scores accounted for only 10% of the overall entrance exam mark with plans to increase this to 70% eventually, prompted by a Ministry of Education desire to encourage secondary school students to pay more attention to their studies and to reduce the influence of multiple-choice testing. This was deemed important since the school English curriculum emphasizes communication, places an equal weight on each of the four skills, and also covers non-language objectives such as cultural issues. Many of these goals are not

clearly amenable to multiple-choice testing. In the following years, the proportion of the overall mark from secondary school performance increased, albeit more slowly than originally planned, to a maximum of 30%, as the Council of University Rectors resisted its inclusion in university entrance on the basis that such scores were unreliable.

Further changes were made in 2006. Scoring on the entrance exam became norm-referenced by converting raw scores into T-scores, and the exams included an open-ended section (a short essay for the English exam) in addition to multiple-choice items. Following a marking fiasco and with most students not writing anything for the essay, the open-ended item was dropped in 2007.

With the dropping of the essay and the capping of secondary school scores at 30%, one of the supposed reasons behind the changes to the entrance system - the need to reduce the influence of multiple-choice testing in Thailand - seems unattainable. In fact, the impact of multiple-choice is even larger than it appears since secondary school scores are also reliant on multiple-choice. A survey of English assessment practices at 78 secondary schools throughout Thailand (Piboonkanarax, 2007) found that exams, comprising 90% multiple-choice, account for 60% of overall secondary school scores on average. Other forms of assessment promoted by the National Education Act are far less important (portfolio assessment accounting for 5% on average, and classroom participation 7%). Overall, multiple-choice testing is the source of around half of all the secondary school scores and thus around 85% of all input for university entrance.

The university entrance system, and especially its heavy emphasis on multiple-choice testing, has wide-ranging negative washback effects on Thai education. These effects are exacerbated since the university entrance exam is used as a model for other

exam designs. This can be seen most clearly when we look at evaluations conducted in 2006, the year when the entrance exam included an essay question. The university entrance exams take place in February or March. In the following semester, many secondary schools included an essay component in their mid-term exams in July, mirroring the format of the university entrance exam. In August, the decision to drop the essay from the entrance exam was announced. In the school final exams in September, most of the schools which had previously included an essay reverted to pure multiple-choice (Watson Todd, 2008).

Reported washback effects from multiple-choice testing include the promotion of rote learning of simplistic, non-transferable knowledge rather than complex skills and encouraging students to be knowledge seekers, not understanding seekers. For English, an emphasis on multiple-choice also means the prioritizing of reading over the productive skills. These effects are readily apparent in Thai education to the extent that students may demand that teaching is restricted to knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Watson Todd, 2008). Such restrictions on content taught are even more apparent in the massive tutorial school system which aims to prepare students for the exam and which many parents perceive as essential if their children are to pass the exam.. The high costs of these tutorial schools reinforce inequalities in access to higher education.

Given these negative impacts, why is multiple-choice testing still the norm in English language assessment in Thailand? With hundreds of thousands of students taking the university entrance exam each year, practicality is clearly an issue, and multiple-choice tests are very practical. Reliability is also high, and is the reason why the Council of University Rectors prefers exams over high school grades for university entrance.

This argument in favor of using exams for university entrance, however, is problematic when we examine their predictive validity. For example, Patharakorn (1998) found that academic scores from secondary schools were better predictors for performance at university than the entrance exam. Recent reported scores from the exam also suggest major problems. For the 2011 entrance, students scored an average of 19.22% for English (Bangkok Post, 2011), an abysmal score, especially considering that all items are four-point multiple-choice. With many secondary school teachers devoting time to teaching for the exam, the very low average score suggests that the target proficiency level of the exam is set unrealistically high and that the exam cannot discriminate among the majority of test-takers.

For work-based assessment of English, there are few locally-made exams which are widely known and accepted. Thus, most assessment outside of the mainstream education system relies on limited versions of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL®) or the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®), or on local exams, such as the Chulalongkorn University Test of English Proficiency (CU-TEP) which is based on the multiple-choice sections of the TOEFL®. The single main exception to this pattern is the Test of English for Thai Engineers and Technicians, a four-skills test using a wide range of item types (see Maneekhao, Jaturapitakkul, Watson Todd & Tepsuriwong, 2006). Nevertheless, multiple-choice tests are still the most common approach to work-based assessment of English in Thailand.

To summarize, English language education in Thailand is dominated by multiple-choice testing, largely driven by the format of the university entrance exam. With the washback effects of promoting knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and with little

exposure to English outside the classroom, the situation does not bode well for the future of English learning in the country.

English language assessment in Singapore

As in many Asian countries, Singapore has a very test-oriented education system which values meritocracy (Albright & Kramer-Dahl, 2009). Authorities, such as the Director of the Planning Division at the Singapore Ministry of Education, argue that using high-stakes testing as the basis for decision making promotes a meritocratic environment conducive to social mobility (Yang, 2011). In Singapore, such high-stakes testing starts early with final-year primary school students taking the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) for placement into 6-year integrated programs and the three main streams of secondary schooling (express, normal academic, normal technical). Similarly, at the end of secondary study (the number of years in part depending on the stream selection from the PLSE), students take one of a selection of high-stakes tests depending on their track and intended goal for entry to junior college or polytechnic, and again at the end of junior college, students take the GCE Advanced Level Examination for placement into university. Studying in the education system in Singapore, therefore, involves regularly taking high-stakes tests that determine one's future.

Unlike Thailand where multiple-choice questions are predominant, open-ended test items are widely used in high-stakes tests in Singapore. For example, the GCE Advanced Level Examination requires test-takers to write an essay and to respond to reading passages through short-answer questions and a summary, while the PSLE includes a conversation as part of the oral test. Even with open-ended assessment

predominant, the high-stakes tests have a deleterious impact on teaching (Koh, Gong & Lye, 2007). Cheah (1998) argued that the examination culture in Singapore hampered the implementation of innovative teaching practices, while Albright & Kramer-Dahl (2009) point out that the high-stakes tests discourage teachers in Singapore from guiding students to read critically.

Recently, however, English language assessment in Singapore has become more diverse with the introduction of holistic assessment in primary schools. In 2008, the Primary Education Review and Implementation (PERI) committee was formed with the mission of recommending initiatives to improve primary school education. One of the main recommendations of the committee was the implementation of holistic assessment in all subjects, including English. Holistic assessment is “the ongoing gathering of information on different facets of a child from various sources, with the aim of providing quantitative and qualitative feedback to support and guide the child’s development” (Lee, 2010, p. 10).

A key rationale for the introduction of holistic assessment is to “encourage schools to move away from an overly strong emphasis on examinations” (Ministry of Education, 2011). The introduction of holistic assessment has four key aims: to develop the whole child, to strike a balance between assessment of learning and assessment for learning, to inform teachers about their practice, and to adopt appropriate assessment approaches (Lee, 2010). Thus, in contrast to previous practices where all assessments were graded to check for mastery of learning, holistic assessment promotes the use of assessment for feedback on performance in addition to grading mastery. For English language assessment, the “bite-sized forms of assessment” used in holistic assessment

(Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 35) could include dramatization, role-play and show-and-tell activities to develop confidence and presentation skills with students using indicators for self and peer assessment and receiving individualized feedback on their performance (Fu, 2010).

A further rationale for the introduction of holistic assessment is the promotion of more engaging teaching methods in primary schools, suggesting that the innovation is expected to have positive washback effects on the teaching and learning process. The Ministry of Education (2010) has published a preliminary collection of teachers' responses to the introduction of holistic assessment which include reports that the innovation "empowered teachers and motivated students" (p. 7), and that students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and more willing to accept classmates' suggestions. However, it is unclear whether such reports reflect widespread washback effects from holistic assessment, since studies of other assessment practices in Asia have shown that intended washback effects are not necessarily achieved (e.g. Shih, 2007).

Although holistic assessment will play a key role in primary school education in Singapore, it should be stressed that it will be restricted to within-school assessment and is not intended to replace the use of PSLE. While promoting more formative, continuous assessment in schools, the PERI committee acknowledged that such assessment cannot be used for high-stakes placement of students at the end of their primary school education (Ministry of Education, 2009). Thus, although assessment at local primary schools will become more diverse, for high-stakes purposes examinations will remain the norm.

In comparison with Thailand, there is less English language assessment outside of the education system in Singapore. Because Singaporeans are now educated in English and with many younger Singaporeans speaking English as a first language, tests of English for professional or workplace purposes are rare.

English language assessment in other ASEAN countries

In the other ASEAN countries where English is a foreign language, the English language assessment system is similar to Thailand in many ways. For example, in Indonesia where English is a compulsory subject at secondary schools and where it is typically taught for four hours a week, there are national-level exams at the completion of both lower and upper secondary schooling and again for university entrance. All of these exams are primarily multiple-choice. While school-based assessments may include elements of continuous assessment through classroom observation and homework assignments, summative final exams, again predominantly multiple-choice, typically account for the majority of assessment of English.

Similarly, Vietnam is another country where exams, which often consist largely of multiple-choice items, dominate English language assessment. English is typically taught from year 3 of primary school and so is included in school-based exams (typically accounting for 60-70% of school-based assessment) and in exams for finishing primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schooling. However, English is only taken as part of the university entrance exams for those candidates applying for related subjects. At the end of undergraduate study there is a nationwide system of assessment of English for graduation, the so-called B-level exam. Again, the B-level exam is primarily multiple-

choice for testing listening, grammar and reading, but it includes an essay component for testing writing. Until recently, this exam was also used by companies as a measure of English proficiency when employing university graduates, but concerns about its reliability have led to other exams, such as the TOEIC®, taking over this role.

In line with the English as a foreign language ASEAN countries, high-stakes exams play a central role in those ASEAN countries where English is an official language, but these exams are generally far less reliant on multiple-choice testing. In Malaysia, the re-emphasis on English in the 1990s, after a period when Bahasa Malaysia was promoted in education, means that it is a compulsory subject in schools with most students receiving 11 years of English at around 3½ hours a week with math and science subjects also taught through English at many schools. National-level exams in English occur on completion of primary schooling, lower secondary schooling and upper secondary schooling as well as being emphasized in university entrance. There is some flexibility and open-endedness in these exams. For instance, the assessment at the end of lower secondary schooling allows speaking skills to be measured through continuous assessment. In addition, on the Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET), while listening and reading are mainly tested through multiple-choice items, the reading assessment also involves cloze and information transfer, the writing assessment uses essays and summary writing, and the speaking assessment requires presentations and discussions. The MUET, then, is likely to provide a better picture of all-round English proficiency than, say, the exclusively multiple-choice university entrance exam in Thailand, although it has been criticized for ignoring social perspectives on literacy and for having dubious predictive validity. While the national-level exams in Malaysia use

British English as a model, there is some evidence that the use of Malaysian English varieties is accepted in school-based tests of English (Davies, Hamp-Lyons and Kemp, 2003).

Conclusion

ASEAN countries (with the exception of Cambodia) place a heavy emphasis on national level examinations in their education systems, and school-based initiatives in assessment have a minor impact. There are, however, key differences in the forms the English language examinations take which may reflect the general levels of English proficiency in the two countries. In Thailand where overall English proficiency is rated very low, multiple-choice testing dominates leading to a focus on language knowledge at the expense of language use, a pattern also predominant in the other ASEAN countries with low general proficiency levels. In Singapore and other ASEAN countries with a high general English proficiency, the open-ended items used in the examinations primarily assess language use, a goal which we believe can also be promoted in the move towards holistic assessment. The general pattern between countries appears to be that the more English is used and the higher the general level of proficiency, the greater the reliance on open-ended assessment. In terms of English language assessment, then, South East Asia is a region with differences and commonalities depending on the level of English proficiency present in each country.

SEE ALSO:

School exit examinations

University admission examinations

Monitoring progress

Consequences and washback

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