

## English for Young Learners (EYL) in ASEAN: Policy and Implementation

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### Abstract

This article reviews the existing literature concerning the policy of English for Young Learners (EYL) and its implementation in ASEAN state members. The source of the review comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, research reports, official government documents, official websites, and newspaper articles discussing ELT, EFL, and EYL in South East Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, The Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Cambodia) published from 2000 to 2020. The discussion is limited to EYL Policy in which English is either taught as a second language or a foreign language. Of all the 10 ASEAN state members, Singapore is therefore excluded in the findings and discussion since English is a national language there. The review show that there are three major areas of EYL policy in ASEAN related to the lowering of age of starting to learn English, changing the status of English as compulsory subject in the primary curriculum, and using English as language of instruction in other subjects. Generally, implementation of policy is still strongly characterized by teachers' underqualification, teachers' shortage, lack of textbook provisions, and technical problems like big number of students in class. There are also concerns that English for primary school children creates disparities in education and the endangerment of local languages.

Keywords: EYL; Primary English; EYL Policy; ASEAN

### Introduction

The teaching of English to young learners (hencefort EYL) has been a global phenomenon for the last twenty years (Rich, 2014). Johnstone (2009) has called EYL as the world's largest educational policy development that has major impacts on educational practice. A survey by British Council in 2013 revealed that more than 60 countries worldwide currently have policy on the introduction of English to either elementary schools curriculum or even to kindergarten (Rixon, 2013). The country members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have also acknowledged the inevitable influence and benefits of English in the Southeast Asian region. Early introduction of English in primary education or even lower has become a common practice.

National policy for lowering the age of starting to learn English is sometimes politically driven as English is seen as a basic skill that all citizens need to obtain (Enever & Moon, 2009).

English is perceived as a convenient access to allow participation in the global trade, economics, politics, culture, communication and to have access to information and technology (British Council, 2013; Gaynor, 2014). The policy for teaching English to young learners (henceforth EYL) may be driven by the assumption that younger children learn better at language (Nunan, 2003). Parental pressure is also considered as the dominant driving force for EYL implementation (Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2004; Hawanti, 2014; Zein, 2015) believing that English proficiency ensure employment benefit in the future for their children.

There are numerous publications related to the policy and practice of English in primary schools in Asian context (Baldauf, Kaplan, Kamwangamalu, & Bryant, 2012; Butler, 2015; Hayes, 2017; Jin & Cortazzi, 2019; Zein, 2017a) or other Asian countries discussed discreetly like in China (Wang, 2009), United Arab Emirates (Ibrahim, Bombieri, & Varenina, 2020), Iran (Taghizadeh, & Yourdshahi, 2020), and Japan (Butler, Someya, & Fukuhara, 2014; Gaynor, 2014). However very limited studies discuss specifically EYL policy and its implementation in ASEAN country members. This article seeks to review the EYL policy and its implementation in the ASEAN countries through a study on literature from numerous publications. Two questions are proposed to guide the study: 1) How are ASEAN countries regulate the teaching of English to young learners? and 2) What challenges do these countries face in implementing the policy?

## Literature review

### EYL policy

The term English for young learners (EYL) or Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in this article is defined as elementary school children's learning of English in the context where English is a second language or a foreign language. It does not include children's learning English in which English is a national language. Of all ten ASEAN country members, Singapore is, therefore, excluded from the discussion. The term primary English is also used in this article to show specifically in which level of schooling English is taught. The discussed policy does not include English for very young learners aged 3-6 or lower (Reilly & Ward, 1997) or pre-primary children.

Kaplan & Baldauf (1997: xi) define language policy as "a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in the society, group or system". Although used interchangeably with language planning, they further differ the two terms by pointing out that language planning is "an activity undertaken by government intended to promote systematic linguistic change in some community of speakers" of which execution needs to be directed by the enactment of government policy. Language policies direct "what, why, and how teachers teach and students learn language" (Widodo, 2016: 128). Therefore, Johnstone (2009) argues that the implementation of a certain language policy cannot be left only to individual teachers nor individual schools, rather it requires nationwide policy to ensure the effectiveness of the mandated program. The policy of EYL worldwide covers five areas, concerning a) the lowering of the age for English teaching, b) making English a compulsory subject in primary schools, c) affecting English in an educational reform (national language reinforcement or English dominant instruction), d) formalization of EYL assessment standard, e) making English the language of instruction for other subjects (Rixon, 2013).

English introduction into the primary education curriculum requires careful planning and consideration (Nguyen, 2011). First, it requires a strong foundation not some "dubious assumptions" (Johnstone, 2009: 32) like the younger the better widely circulated belief. Secondly, it also requires studies on adequate provision for the program like teacher supply, textbooks, and

teacher training programs. Third, it requires sociocultural and political considerations on how the new policy affects the national and local languages in the nation (Enever & Moon, 2009). Careful planning and thoughtful consideration prevent polities from making EYL policy a hasty decision.

The implementation of EYL policy may face some obstacles too. Elementary School English (ESE) policy in Japan was opposed for fear of the backwash effect towards Japanese pupils' acquisition of Japanese and lowering of national identity. This policy is considered put too much burden on teachers as implementer of the programs who are supposed to design teaching programs and conduct lessons (Gaynor, 2014). In China, contrary to the mandated student-centered approach, teachers still use many repetition and recitation. These two techniques are derived from the strong teacher-centered approach that affect the EYL practice in China (Wang, 2009). There are also questions on suitable starting age, teacher quality and training, and appropriate methodology to address in Japan (Gaynor, 2014), Columbia, Chile, and Brazil (Miller, et. al, 2019), and some African countries like Uganada, Ghana, Mali, and Kenya (Ssentanda & Ngwaru, 2019).

While efforts to provide sufficient qualified primary English teachers and appropriate teacher training have been constantly researched and developed in Europe (Copland, Garton, Burns; 2014; Enever, 2014; Rich, 2019) and Asia (Butler 2015; Zein 2019a; Zhang, 2019), teacher qualification is constantly a challenge (Butler, 2015; Wang, 2009). Apparently, primary English teachers are not only required to have a mastery in English but also pedagogical skills in teaching English to young learners (Enever, 2014; Rich, 2019).

#### Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN is an organization which aims at promoting collaboration in economics, social, cultural, technical, and scientific fields as well as at maintaining political stability in the South East Asia region (ASEAN Overview, n.d.). The countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia are the ten member countries of ASEAN. The ASEAN member countries shared past histories of European imperialism, excluding Thailand, which shaped the language in education policy of the ASEAN countries today (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Lee, 2018). Despite the wide diversity of language spoken in the Southeast Asia region (Kirkpatrick, 2017), English is the official working language in ASEAN meetings as stated in Article 34 of the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN, 2020). English was chosen as the working language as it is considered a neutral language to all member states and the language also symbolizes globalization and modernization. As English grows more importantly worldwide including in the South East Asian region, these countries recently have language in education policy which places English as the main second or foreign language to teach in schools. ASEAN state members share the same interest in introducing English as a subject in primary education level (Kirkpatrick, 2012, 2017).

#### English in ASEAN state members

Singapore adopts English their national language. There are at least three reasons for such decision; first, being a non-Asian language, English is seen as a 'neutral' language (Chua, 2012) to bridge cultural and racial differences in Singapore (Chinese, Malay, and Indians). Secondly, to be able to grow economically, Singapore needs to get involve in international trade through its industries and English is used as a tool to connect Singapore with the global world (Chua, 2012; Chin, 2007; Jones, 2017). Thirdly, English is the most preferred language by the educational and political elites that it is continually used and preserved (Chin, 2007). English is a medium of

instructions for economically and technologically strategic subjects like Mathematics, Science, and Geography. Other languages that form Singapore's cultural diversity (Chinese, Malay, and Tamil) are used in subjects of Civics and Moral Education as part of the efforts to preserve the cultural identity (Chua, 2012; Jones, 2017).

Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam place English as a second language with Bahasa Melayu as the national language. In Malaysia, English is decided as a second language in the 1970s and only in early 1990s to the millennium that English is acknowledged as being important to strengthen Malaysia's position in the world (Chin, 2007). Through the 1985 bilingual education policy known as Dwibahasa (two languages), Brunei Darussalam calls for Malay to be used as the medium of instruction for all subjects except English Language at the Primary low level (Chin, 2007). In the Philippines, English plays a very crucial role. It serves as a second language beside Filipino which is their national language and several other local indigenous languages.

The presence of English in Thailand was not governed by imperialism (Bennui & Hashim, 2014). English is seen as not only a tool for nation's economic improvement (Kirkpatrick, 2012) but also a means of communication. It supports people's mobility in commerce, tourism, and study which eventually contributes to individual's and country's welfare. In Indonesia, the 1945 constitution mandated Bahasa Indonesia (BI) as the national language as it is considered a democratic language which does not represent the language of any ethnic group in multicultural Indonesia (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Despite the long history of Dutch occupation, English is the first foreign language (not Dutch) to teach. It is partly because Dutch symbolized the language of the colonialists (Lie, 2007; Lauder, 2008) and partly because Dutch does not have the international status like English does (Lie, 2007; Widodo, 2016).

During British imperialism in Myanmar, English was the official language of the administration but other languages including Burmese were encouraged. Upon independence, Burmese was mandated to be the national language. English was permitted and taught as a subject in primary schools. During 1960s to 1980s, under military rulership, Burmese became the only language of instruction and English weakened. However, starting from 1988, the new ruling government felt the urge for the revival of English (Kirkpatrick, 2017).

Cambodian national language is Khmer and it is also the main language of instruction in basic to secondary education. The main foreign language to teach is currently English (Neau, 2003; Senase, 2019) influenced by the US. The decision to choose English as first foreign language to learn may be driven by Cambodia's eagerness to take active part in ASEAN ever since its membership in the organization (Kirkpatrick, 2012). As English is used as the official language in ASEAN meetings, (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017), Cambodian government officials believed that they need English to defend their interests in the very competitive circle of countries (Clayton, 2006 in Kirkpatrick, 2012). Despite the strong influence of French in Vietnam and Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), English has gained its popularity in these two countries. English is decided as the first foreign language to learn due to its inevitable influence on the global market and foreign relationship (Thin, 2006 in Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat, 2017).

## **Methodology**

The present review focusses on the policy on the teaching of English to young learners in ASEAN state members and its implementation. The source of the review are peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, research reports, official government documents, official websites, and newspaper articles. The first round of search was performed by typing the keywords to google search engine, google scholar, and journal repository database under the

keywords of ELT South East Asia, ELT in (ASEAN country names), EFL in South East Asia, ASEAN, EFL in (ASEAN country names), English in ASEAN, and English in (ASEAN country names). The next search phase used the keywords of EYL, TEYL, primary English, language policy, EYL policy in (ASEAN country names), Primary English policy in (ASEAN country names). Only articles and papers published from year 2000 to 2020 are selected. However, documents like government official copy of regulation may be dated older.

We stored the articles and documents in computer database folders based on the names of the ASEAN country members. The data is presented in tables with three headings policy, implementation, and challenges. The analysis was conducted by classifying the policy into the five types EYL policy discussed by Rixon (2013). Based on the review, the results are presented in description. Description of results is of a general nature representing similarities between countries or opposite situations. Detailed description can be obtained from the original source of articles or documents. There is unbalanced discussion concerning Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR of which very limited number of publications discussing ELT nor EYL in these countries were obtained. There are also articles concerning a country which present different data. In this case, we opted for the later published articles as they are considered to have the more updated representation of the discussed country.

## Findings and discussion

### EYL policy in ASEAN countries

EYL policy in ASEAN countries cover at least three major areas related to the lowering of age of starting to learn English, changing the status of English as compulsory subject in the primary curriculum, and using English as language of instruction in other subjects. English is taught in Primary School as a subject in Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and The Philippines. Although in the outer circle countries (Kachru, 1990): Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, there is no significance change in the lowering age, in the expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1990): Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR, there is a major change of policy regarding the age of starting to learn English.

### *Changing the status of English as a compulsory subject in the primary curriculum and lowering of age starting English*

In Thailand, English in primary levels was first made compulsory in 1996 (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2002; Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). English is taught from grade 1 of elementary school. In Vietnam, English is introduced into the Primary Education curriculum in 2008 through the Prime Minister's Decision 1400 (Nguyen, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2016). The national plan on "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the Period of 2008–2020 (Project 2020)" mandates that English is taught as a compulsory subject from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students. Vietnamese students learn English starting from age 8 (primary schooling) all the way to secondary education. In Lao PDR, Primary school students are required to learn English from Primary 3 (Kirkpatrick, 2012) while in Cambodia, English was formerly taught in Secondary school starting from grade 7 (Nara, 2001; Neau, 2003; Igawa, 2008, 2010) but later introduced in Primary 5 above in 2013 (Kirkpatrick, 2012). In 2014, the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports instructed that English is taught as a subject in grade 4 (Kosonen, 2019).

EYL in Indonesia was first introduced into the primary education curriculum through Presidential Decree Number 28 Year 1990 which allowed English to be included in primary school

curriculum (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 1990). The inclusion of English in Primary School curriculum as a local content subject in 1993 was enacted in the decree of Ministry of Education and Culture Number 060/U/1993, (Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan [Ministry of Education and Culture], 1993). English was offered in grades 4, 5, and 6, (Zein 2012). Being a local subject content meaning that the local government (provinces and cities or regencies) may regulate the practice of primary English most suited to their condition and needs. Schools were allowed to provide English subjects as an elective course to their students as long they can manage the pedagogical practice of EYL (Iskandar, 2015; Nurkamto, et.al., 2017). There was no official curriculum in this period of time which led to different implementation of EYL regionally (Madya, 2008). English was taught to 4-6 graders in some districts and to all grades in other districts. Later in the 2004 curriculum, the government provided the National Standards (NS) that applied as a curriculum framework for primary English. The aim of English in elementary education is to develop language skills used to accompany actions (Menteri Pendidikan Nasional, 2006). English remained as a local content subject. When curriculum 2013 was implemented, however, English was no longer a local content subject, it became an optional (elective) lesson (Lestariyana & Widodo 2018).

#### *Using English as a language of instruction for other subjects in primary schools*

The three outer circle countries all have the English as a medium of instruction (EMI) policy in the primary schools. In Malaysia, English was regulated as the medium of instruction for the mathematics and science in 2003. However, the policy was reversed in 2009 as reports showed that students, especially those in rural areas, had difficulties in understanding the subjects when taught in English. The decision was informed by the students' under achievement in the national evaluation, teachers' limited level of English proficiency that restricted their use of English to only 55% in class, and socioeconomic divergence between the rural and urban schools, (Ali, Hamid, & Moni, 2012).

Brunei Darussalam calls for Malay to be used as the medium of instruction for all subjects except English Language at the Primary low level (Chin, 2007) through the 1985 bilingual education policy known as Dwibahasa (two languages). English as a second language in Brunei Darussalam, is studied as a subject from primary one to primary three. However, from primary four to primary six English is also employed as the medium of instruction together with Malay, (Kam, 2002). In 2009 the Brunei government applied the national curriculum known as the *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad 21* (SPN21) which aims at preparing the Bruneian students with the skills to meet the demands and challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Jones, 2016). English is mandated to be the language of instruction in teaching mathematics and science from primary one, (Tuah, 2017; Jones, 2016).

English is a medium of instruction for Math and science subjects from the first year of primary school in the Philippines, (Kirkpatrick, 2012). After several curriculum changes (Mindó, 2008; Karami & Zamanian, 2016), the country enacted the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) in 1974 that requires children to learn English Communication Arts, Mathematics, and Science subjects in English and Filipino Communication Arts, Social Studies, and History in Filipino (Koo, 2008).

In the expanding circle countries, only Vietnam and Myanmar implement EMI in secondary education and above for some subjects but not in primary schools. Indonesia, on the other hand, in 2003 implemented *Sekolah Berstandar Internasional* (SBI) Policy which was supposed to introduce English not only as a subject but also the language of instruction from grade

4 of primary school onward (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The SBI policy was later withdrawn as it was considered to benefit several privileged schools and had the potential to discriminate the underprivileged students (Dharmaningias, 2013; Hamid, Nguyen, & Baldauf, 2013).

#### EYL curriculum and its implementation

##### *Malaysia*

In 2011, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MMOE) issued the 2011 Malaysian English Language Curriculum for Primary Schools which aimed at equipping pupils with basic English skills that would allow them to communicate effectively in a range of different situation (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). The curriculum emphasizes on the learning to communicate in the target language through interaction, using authentic texts in learning, providing opportunities for students to focus on both language and the learning process, making the most of students' experience of classroom learning, and linking class language learning with off classroom language activities. The curriculum was applied to all primary year groups of students and teachers in the country (Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). Today, Malaysian students learn English for eleven years respectively, excluding pre-schooling, and continue to study English until tertiary levels (Darmi & Albion, 2013).

##### *Brunei Darussalam*

The SPN21 curriculum is popular among Bruneian parents who demanded bilingual education for their children (Sercombe, 2014; Jones, 2016). Children are expected to already have a certain level of English literacy when they enter primary schools where English is used as the primary medium of instruction (Mohamad, Yaakub, Pearson, & Sim, 2018). Therefore, wealthier parents often opt for private English medium kindergartens to have a better start in the primary schools (Jones, 2016). Some parents often continue sending the children to private schooling after preschools, believing that they are better than government funded schools. Brunei has sufficient provision of both nationally and internationally trained teachers. There are teachers who are proficient in English and are pedagogically well trained. English pedagogy in classrooms is unquestionably well supported as there are teaching guide for teachers, workbook for pupils, and sufficient learning media for example audio-cassettes and flashcards (Jones, 2016). SPN21 has a more learner-centered approach which caters the need of individual learner through broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated learning experiences (Goode, 2020).

##### *The Philippines*

Under the 1974 Bilingual Education Policy, the New Elementary School Curriculum (NESC) was launched in 1989. NESC mandated that English covers the skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing with studies on oral and written literatures too (Mindó, 2008). The listening-speaking area comprises different types of listening and speaking events and stages of conversation such as topic initiation, turn-taking, topic maintenance and topic shift. Writing area covers practical writing, composition writing, and creative writing. The literature consists of skills of appreciating different genres of literature, substance, and content (Mindó, 2008: 23). In 2002, the Basic Education Curriculum was initiated aiming at developing literacy and improving the quality of education. This curriculum mandates the implementation of more integrated and interactive learning, the insertion of values in education, and also encourages the use of information and communication technology. English is a mandatory subject starting from grade 1 of elementary school (Mindó, 2008). It is reported that English instruction differs from school to

school depending on the school's socio-geographical situations. The more privileged schools have more provision of textbooks distributed equally among students. The learning resources are mostly American textbooks which are reprinted in the Philippines and are enriched by additional stories written by Filipinos authors in English. English instruction is characterized by the sequences of teachers reading stories, class discussion related to stories, language activities heavily focused on grammar, and vocabulary and spelling (Koo, 2008).

### *Thailand*

The Basic Education Core Curriculum states that primary schoolers learn English 40 hours per academic year which consists of at least 1 hour English learning time per week in grade 1 to 3 and 2 hours per week for 3 above (Prasongporn, 2016). The focus of ELT in Thailand is for students to be able to use English to communicate internationally, acquire knowledge, use the language to facilitate learning in higher education, and achieve prospective career or work, (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). The policy of EYL includes: 1) Students should reach at least A1 Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) level by the end of the schooling years of primary education, 2) Communicative Language Teaching is the recommended approach and learning start from listening, speaking, reading, and writing discretely, 3) implementing CEFR benchmarks into the curriculum and the teaching learning materials, 4) Teachers' are assessed based on their content and English skills, and 5) ICT based media in language teaching are encouraged, (Prasongporn, 2016). As one of the efforts to accelerate English proficiency among students, the Thailand government initiated the English-Speaking Year 2012 program which aims at improving Thai students' English communication skills. The program encourages English instruction which involves speaking practice minimum 1 day each week for all students from pre-primary students to university level (Kaur, Young, Kirkpatrick, 2016). The Thai government cooperates with British Council to provide trainings to improve English proficiency and teaching skills to English Thai Primary and Secondary school English teachers (British Council helps, 2018). The Government also provides incentives for teachers and other supporting infrastructure to support the program. Nonthaisong (2015) reported that despite the mandated communicative competence of the students as the goal of English in basic education, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students are supposed to take the O-NET (Ordinary National Educational Test) which tests grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension discretely. Consequently, many teachers use past O-NET test as part of their classroom assessment method (Narathakoon, Sapsirin, & Subphadoongchone, 2020).

### *Indonesia*

Myanmar Times once reported "Except for Indonesia, all ASEAN countries have compulsory classes in English at the primary level" (Phyu, 2017). This report reflects the current situation of EYL in Indonesia. Trimmed from Primary Schools in 2013, EYL has been practiced in uncertainties ever since. Private schools generally hold the program but public schools have quite different approaches regarding primary English. Some elementary schools in big cities remain to have Primary English through Regional Regulation by giving autonomy to teachers to develop their own materials and assessment (Sulistiyo, Haryanto, Widodo, & Elyas, 2019). Schools offer Primary English as either compulsory subject, extracurricular activity, or pupils' self-development program (Diyanti, et.al, 2020). There are many textbooks used in Indonesia Primary schools. Some private schools use textbooks from international publishers but there are also nationally published textbooks written by local English textbooks developers. The nationally



published primary English textbooks mostly used in schools are *Grow with English* (Damayanti, 2014; Hermawan & Noerkhasanah, 2012; Sulistiyo, Supiani, Kailani, & Lestariyana, 2020), *Go with English* and *Learning by Doing* (Damayanti, 2014). All three of them are not ministry issued primary English textbooks. As there is currently no official policy or national curriculum regarding Primary English, teachers mostly turn to textbook to help them teaching (Hawanti, 2014). Teachers believe that English in primary school bridges students language learning between elementary and secondary school therefore primary English is considered important for students to familiarize themselves with English before entering secondary schools (Sulistiyo, et.al, 2019).

### *Vietnam*

Within the Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the Period of 2008–2020 project, English instruction is started from 3<sup>rd</sup> grade with allotted time of 40 minutes each, 4 times a week. The updated 2010 primary English curriculum approaches learning in a more child-centered focus aiming at developing pupils' communicative competence through communicative methods as well as suitable and meaningful themes and topics for primary school students (Nguyen et al, 2016), providing children's cross-cultural understanding in English and the culture of the countries speaking the language and developing positive attitude towards English (Cao, 2019). Nguyen, et. al (2016) also reported that class in some public schools may consist of 45 to 50 students, which is far from ideal for an EYL. Teachers split students into two groups, one group learning English and another learning other subjects with a different teacher. Communicative language teaching is the suggested approach but teachers rarely involve activities that would develop students' communicative competence. Teachers claim that the large number of students impedes communicative activities (Nguyen, 2011). Teachers use both English and Vietnamese for classroom instruction. English for short instruction and Vietnamese is used for longer explanation (Nguyen, 2018). Prime Minister's Decision 1400 decides CEFR A1 level is the standard learning outcome level to all primary school graduates and with additional tasks for teachers to carefully monitor students' progress and year end summative test results (Ai, Nhu, & Thuy, 2019). Teacher training focusses on developing English proficiency and EYL pedagogical skills (Vu & Pham, 2014) with great efforts in assisting teachers to develop their skills in developing age-appropriate learning activities and materials (Nguyen, 2018). There are three sets of primary English textbooks used in Vietnam 1) *Teaching English in Primary School* (Books 1, 2 ,3) and *Let's Learn English* (Books 1, 2, 3) published by Educational Publishing House, 2) *English 1–5* published by the Centre for Educational Technology, and (3) *Let's Go and Family and Friends* published by Oxford University Press (Dang & Seals, 2018).

### *Myanmar*

English is taught since Kindergarten following the policy of the Ministry of Education under the enactment of the 2014 national education law called the KG+12 (Kindergarten plus 12 years of English learning) curriculum. The curriculum was implemented in Kindergartens since 2016-17 academic year and year 2017-18 for Grade 1 Primary level, (Phyu, 2017). Recently introduced primary English curriculum project states that primary English in Myanmar aims at developing students' communicative competence by shaping real-world English skills which covers the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The primary English curriculum adopts a more child centered approach which is more appealing for students to come to class. The textbook is accompanied with teachers' guidebook and supplemented with language instruction, methodological guidance, linguistic information and information on cultural issues. The textbook

plays a very important role in the teaching-learning process as Myanmar students have limited exposure to English. Teachers are encouraged to follow the instructional steps as explicitly provided in the teacher's guide (Hall & Gaynor, 2020).

#### *Lao PDR and Cambodia*

English in Lao PDR is introduced since Primary School Grade 3. A study related to ELT practices in Lao PDR revealed that the new English content and kinds of activities applied in class were short but various (spelling games, role playing, repetition drilling, reading aloud), which were also beneficial for teachers to focus on pronunciation and grammar. Teachers applied Grammar Translation Method which were characterized by lots of spelling and spelling out words activities and pronunciation and grammar accuracy focus. Total Physical Response method was also implemented in class especially when teachers introduced new words using bodily movement. Teachers would act out the words to impose meaning and pronounce the words slowly. Classroom language (instructions and questions) were mostly done bilingually, English then Lao language, (Intarapanich, 2013).

Effectively since 2017, English is taught from Primary 4 to Cambodian children for 40 minutes twice a week (Amaro & Chheng, 2017; Chilmonik, 2018). For government funded schools, English textbooks in primary schools are provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. Textbooks come without workbook for grade 4 nor guidebook for teachers (Mao, 2015; Kosonen, 2019). Although Cambodia is still struggling with the lack of qualified teachers, the Minister asked headmasters to assign teachers with sufficient English knowledge or those who have ever received curriculum training to overcome teachers' shortage (Amaro & Chheng, 2017).

#### Challenges in EYL

##### *Teachers' underqualification*

Apart from Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and the Philippines, the practice of EYL in other ASEAN countries is mostly characterized by the lack of underqualified teachers. Teachers' underqualification is related to the limited EYL pedagogical skills and language proficiency. In both Indonesia and Vietnam, most EFL primary English teachers are those prepared for teaching in secondary schools who were never trained to work with young learners (Zein, 2016; Nguyen, et.al, 2016). These teachers are not trained to work with children. Beside lacking in EYL pedagogy, primary English teachers in Indonesia (Sikki, Hamra, Amran, & Moni, 2013; Zein, 2016), Vietnam (Hoa & Tuan, 2007), Thailand (Graham, 2009), Cambodia (Saroeun, 2015) generally also lack in English proficiency, particularly those who do not have their degree from English Language teacher education (Graham, 2009; Zein, 2016).

##### *Teachers shortage*

Thailand experiences teachers' shortage with the lowering of age starting English. Sixty percent of English teachers do not have the proper qualification for teaching English and have low English proficiency themselves. Some teachers admitted that they are "forced" to teach English to meet the demands of teachers although they do not have the proper qualification to teach English (Kaewmala, 2012). Primary English teachers, in Thailand and Indonesia, can also be elementary school homeroom teachers or any teachers recruited to meet primary English teachers' shortage (Diyanti, et. al, 2020; Graham, 2009). Cambodia's primary English instruction is highly dependent on the availability of English teachers for the school (Saroeun, 2015). Although Cambodia is still struggling with the lack of teachers, the Minister asked headmasters to assign teachers with

sufficient English knowledge or those who have ever received curriculum training to overcome teachers' shortage (Amaro & Chheng, 2017).

#### *Primary English teachers' unclear employment status*

A study by Diyanti, et.al (2020) revealed that Indonesian primary English teachers currently also face a dilemma in terms of their employment status and professional development (PD) program. Fully employed teachers are entitled to financial and health benefits (Zein, 2017b). As English is not a compulsory subject in Elementary schools, primary English teachers either have to pursue another degree in Elementary Teacher Education or be fulltime secondary school English teachers with additional task of teaching English in elementary schools to acquire a full employment status. Regarding PD programs, teachers reported inequalities in opportunities to join a government facilitated PD program (Chodijah, 2007; Sulistiyo, et. al, 2019; Zein, 2015) and mismatch between PD materials in the workshop and teachers' actual needs (Chodijah, 2007; Zein, 2015).

#### *Class size and availability of textbooks*

Nearly all extended circle countries have problems with the large number of students in class. Number of students in EYL classes in Vietnam is reported can go up to 55 students. The large number of students does and the inflexible seating arrangements do not allow students to do the necessary interaction during English. Although, the textbooks distributed have been designed to include more interactive communication activities teachers have difficulties in implementing the activities in the overcrowded classroom (Cao, 2019).

Suitable yet affordable textbooks for all children have also been a constant problem in Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Cambodia although recently there are efforts to develop more culturally suitable textbooks for Myanmar with the help of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (Hall & Gaynor, 2020) and Vietnam through a cooperation between local publisher and British Council (Hoa & Tuan, 2007). The primary English textbooks for the 4<sup>th</sup> graders in Cambodia are provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. However, there is no English teacher guidebook or workbook for grade 4. Textbooks for grade 5 and 6 are not available yet either. It is also reported that not all schools have access to teaching and learning materials to meet the demands of the curriculum (Kosonen, 2019).

#### *Disparities in education*

Insertion of English in the primary school curriculum is reported to cause disparities in education. South East Asia is a diverse region which can be geographically, culturally, linguistically challenging. Children in the big cities may have all the advantages of easy access to education compared to children in the rural areas. Some children learn English as third language after their mother tongue and the national language. These challenges may cause educational divides for children in learning English.

In some of Brunei rural areas, there are children who speak neither Malay nor English. Teachers reported that they have difficulties learning English. These children receive very little supports from their parents and mostly cannot afford textbooks (Jones, 2016; Sercombe, 2014). English-instructed classes seem to benefit children whose parents are also familiar with the language and are used to communicate in the language at home (Haji-Othman, McLellan, & Jones, 2019) or children who go to upscale schools (Deterding & Sharbawi, 2013).

English instruction in the Philippines differs from school to school depending on the school's socio-geographical situations. The more privileged schools have more provision of textbooks distributed equally among students compared to the underprivileged ones (Koo, 2008). Similarly, not all Vietnamese children have access to learning English due to lack of facilities especially in mountainous areas. Students also have very limited opportunities to use English outside of the classroom (Cao, 2019). In Cambodia, Primary English teachers' shortage impedes English instruction in schools especially in public schools. Parents who can afford send their children to schools with English program which creates educational gaps (Igawa, 2010; Saroeun, 2015).

In Indonesian case, since not all primary schools have English as a subject or additional language program, teachers reported primary school graduates' significant gaps in language learning ability, experience, and knowledge. Teachers believe that early introduction to English in primary schools enables students to become familiar with English as a compulsory subject in their secondary school as English in primary school bridges students' language learning between elementary and secondary school (Diyanti, et.al, 2020; Sulistiyo, et.al., 2019).

#### *Concern on vernacular language endangerment*

The growth of EYL also raises concern on the endangerment of vernacular languages. The insertion of English in primary education may reduce the slot for other vernacular languages to be taught at schools (Baldauf, et.al, 2012). Concerns on the reduction of space for indigenous language teaching in elementary schools became one of the reasons for the trimming of English for Indonesia primary school curriculum (Hadisantoso, 2010; Zein, Sukyadi, Hamied, & Lengkanawati, 2020). More parents opt for enrolling their children in schools providing English lessons that schools prefer to have English program than any other language education (Zein, 2017b). The trimming of English is aimed at providing more chances for Indonesian children to develop their linguistic competence of the mother tongue Zein, et al, 2020).

This concern is strongly felt in the Philippines and Malaysia too. In 2009, the Philippine Department of Education issued the Institutionalizing Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education that asserts the learners' mother tongue (not necessarily Filipino) as the medium of instruction in early years of primary education, (Kirkpatrick, 2012, 2017). Although the main target remains for the mastery of English and Filipino, the Philippines government is currently trying to preserve the indigenous language in the country's diverse context. Similarly, Malaysian Ministry of Education states that all national schools use Bahasa Melayu while vernacular schools use Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil as the medium of instructions (Chin, 2007; Pandian, 2002).

#### *Discussion and implication*

Driven by similar needs to embrace globalization and to excel in economics, trades, and politics, the ASEAN country members share similar policy regarding English in primary schools. Both the outer and expanding circle countries feel the urgency for the English early introduction. English is also used as a medium of instruction (EMI) for other subjects particularly in Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, Myanmar and Vietnam to accelerate English acquisition among school children. However, the policy for early introduction of English and EMI is seen as governments' "quick fixes" (Kirkpatrick & Bui, 2012) towards the mass distribution of English to the citizen. It may raise linguistics conflict among the children (Kirkpatrick & Bui, 2012) affected by the policy and potentially harm children's educational development struggling to understand the content of the subjects being taught in English (Pennycook, Kubota, & Morgan, 2013). As

evidently seen in Malaysia's students' poor results in Mathematics and Science tests which led to reversal of EMI policy in 2009 (Gill, 2012).

There are also concerns related to the endangerment of vernacular languages. Interestingly enough all the outer circle countries currently have reintroduced their vernacular language policy in effort to preserve the local languages. The rise of English popularity among younger learners may reduce the use of mother tongue at homes and potentially reduces the teaching times of other local languages at schools (Baldauf, et.al., 2012). In the case of Indonesia, the trimming of EYL from the Elementary School curriculum is seen as a way to strengthen the position of the national language. Although it is considered a radical move of a government as other countries opt for a more balanced language in education policy both for English and other languages in the country.

Another concern is related to inequalities in opportunities to learn English which lead to educational gaps. The challenging terrains, seas separated islands, jungles, mountainous or swampy areas may cause disparities in education development between islands, (Madya, 2008). The different terrain of area may cause students in less privileged schools receive less attention and have less provision of textbooks or other supporting facilities compared to those in the more accessible places. There are children who do not have access to English learning as easily as those children in the big cities or other places with ample amenities. Even in countries like the Philippines and Brunei Darussalam, children who come from areas whose language is a minority also experience the disparities in opportunities to learn a foreign language.

Apart from Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, and the Philippines, the practice of EYL in other ASEAN countries is mostly characterized by the lack of qualified teachers and the poor supporting facilities like books and learning media. An ideal EYL practice, according to Cao (2019) includes appropriately trained teachers, conducive learning environment and facilities, and a supporting regulation. The first factor is qualified teachers both linguistically and pedagogically. Teachers' supply and appropriate qualification have continued to be a problem in the practice of EYL worldwide (Rixon, 2013). One of the most visible efforts to meet the needs of primary English teachers would be to train homeroom teachers (class teachers) to be able to teach English to their students (Zein, 2019b). These teachers have at least one advantage that they have the knowledge and skills of working with young learner. The training can focus more on building their language skills including classroom English, pronunciation and grammar, EYL teaching methods and techniques, designing and selecting appropriate and engaging activities, materials, and media. EYL practice needs to meet all the appropriate conditions for learning such as passable exposure to language, engaging interaction in the language, appropriate materials, and teacher education that meets the requirement of an EYL program (Rixon, 2013).

The second necessary condition is improvement of classroom condition and other supporting facilities. Elementary school classrooms are typically crowded with more than 20 students in each class. Large number of students in class either impedes effective classroom management (Zein, 2019b) or does not provide children with the necessary interaction space with each other (Cao, 2019) which eventually leads to difficulty in implementing the endorsed communicative approach. Other necessary facilities include textbooks and storybooks or picture books that would attract students to read, and audio and videos or short movies that may become extra exposure to English. Recent development, however, shows efforts for primary English textbooks and learning materials provisions with the aid of foreign agencies like in Myanmar and Vietnam as well as more intensive teacher training in Vietnam particularly in using appropriate techniques for teaching young learners. Indonesia shows very interesting condition in which

ministry-issued primary English textbooks are unavailable but there are abundance choice of textbooks from national and international publishers available.

The third necessary condition is the supporting policy and regulation to ensure the comfortable practice of EYL. A national framework which allows regional government to acknowledge the people's linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity in their developed local curriculum is especially urgent in ASEAN countries. Kirkpatrick (2017: p. 7) suggests that the EYL curriculum requires inclusion of materials about the linguistic, religious and cultural diversity of the region and relevant assessment to ensure the goal of the EYL program is on intelligibility and ability to communicate in target language in different situations and not native speaker-like language production.

### Conclusion

English in South East Asia region is seen as a means of embracing globalization and a medium of seizing international politics, economics, education, and trade opportunities. The international status of English drives ASEAN state members to accelerate citizens' English proficiency by introducing English earlier in primary school education curriculum. Although the implementation of the policy is still very much colored by challenges, there are promising efforts to improve the EYL programs in the future. There are concerns that early introduction to English endangers local languages and creates disparities in education. However, new policies regarding language in education policy is initiated to reintroduce local and or national languages mediated instructions to strengthen local/national languages' acquisition among elementary students in ASEAN.

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