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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Neo-liberalism, globalization, language policy and practice issues in the Asia-Pacific region

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By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the English language had become the de facto lingua franca of the modern world. It is the most popular second or foreign language studied, such that now there are more people who have learned English as a second language and speak it with some competence than there are native English speakers. But why has English gained such prominence? What effect does this have on the globalized world? In this paper we argue that the importance of English in many ways promotes a neo-colonialism and certainly abets the neo-liberal ideals of encouraging a market economy. We present a series of cases in the Asia-Pacific region to illustrate dimensions of English as the hegemonic language and the implications of this for education policy and practice as examined in comparative education research.

Keywords: hegemonic language; globalization; neo-colonialism; neo-liberalism

Introduction

Language and culture are powerful determinants of identity. People everywhere strive to maintain and preserve the language of their heritage. But faced with the dominance of potent economic forces, often propounded by former colonizers, less influential groups must struggle to choose whether to support indigenous languages and culture or try to assimilate into the more powerful group. Membership in the knowledge economy is a goal sought worldwide. Since the language of the knowledge economy is most often English or other powerful European languages, knowledge of the language of power has high priority. This paper presents some of the issues arising over questions of dominance, identity and languages and draws upon international research from several countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The connections between globalization and neo-liberalism and hegemonic languages like English cannot be underestimated. Consequently in the paper, first the context of globalization in a neo-liberal age as related to English is reviewed. Next, it focuses on the Asia-Pacific region within this context and on the interplay of global forces and needs or contexts inside countries in the region. Thirdly, selected cases from the Asia-Pacific region to illustrate the impact of English in the region’s countries and its connection to the maintenance of the neo-liberal agenda are presented. Finally in the concluding section, implications for future comparative education research in the region are discussed.

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Theoretical underpinnings

For this paper arguments are framed in terms of elements of globalization, neo-liberal policy dominance, and the so-called “dialectic of the global and the local” (Arnove, 2013). These are common contemporary theoretical frames for comparative education research as they bring to the fore the tensions, contradictions, and policy-practice dilemmas in the Asia-Pacific region as in other world regions. Globalization in our modern world has been connected to the power status of English. It involves interconnectivity made possible by technology and the English language, the two elements together deemed as “global literacy skills” (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007, p. 1).

Globalization in this sense implies rapid and uncomplicated communication. However, the situation becomes less benign when one considers that the language of communication is most likely English, requiring millions of non-English speakers to acquire sufficient English proficiency in the language for participation in the globalized world. When countries accept the need to provide the global literacy skills mentioned above regarding English, they are also accepting the Weltanschauung [world view/ideology] of the English-speaking world. It also implies acceptance of a neo-liberal approach to economic management irrespective of local contexts and traditions. As Arnove (2013, pp. 1–25) argued, the “dialectic of the global and the local” theoretical scheme is evident in the commonly created disconnect between the global mandates or influences and the local contexts and needs in many countries, in any and all contexts involving language use, perhaps particularly in education (see Brook Napier, 2011 for a global overview of country cases). Further, the arguments are presented in a post-colonial frame related to world systems theory in which economic, political and cultural domination play a leading role, while Eurocentric knowledge and systematic injustices are directed at the so-called “other” populations of the peripheral world (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2006, pp. 9–13; Young, 2001, p. 15).

For countries that at one time were colonies, aspects of neo-colonialism are also at issue. Certainly researchers like Pennycook (1998, 2002) and Phillipson (2006) saw the spread of English as an example of post- or neo-colonialism. Most former colonies have kept the colonial language as an official one even if they permit local languages to have national language status. Even countries such as Cambodia, Vietnam or Thailand that were never English colonies have embraced English as the medium of instruction (MoI) at the tertiary level. Increasingly, tertiary-level education is provided in English, particularly for subjects like business, commerce and science. Universities are keen to embrace internationalization which on the surface promises cross-cultural communication and understanding, but in reality this often means that universities in countries outside of the Global North privilege Eurocentric knowledge and neo-liberal approaches as promoted by the Global North, often to the detriment of local priorities. Often, post-colonial education systems follow previous colonial patterns in the way they model their curricula and many even retain examinations from the former colonial power. This practice encourages cultural disconnects. Textbooks prepared in the Global North will often include contexts unfamiliar to the students from the South. Some topics attuned to Western realities may be quite alien to Eastern practices. English, however, has high academic currency; and has become a sort of gatekeeper for higher education studies.

Neo-liberalism, globalization, the knowledge economy and English dominance

One of the most powerful ideologies associated with globalization that pervades today is that of neo-liberalism, roughly defined as a system of political and economic practices
favouring laissez-faire economic policies, free trade, privatization and deregulation combined with minimal government intervention in business and reduced public expenditures on social services (Bourdieu, 2001; Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005; Thorsen, 2010). Neo-liberals are convinced of the primacy of the market that is best left to its own devices and will correct itself when problems arise. The spread of modern economic globalization has been accompanied by neo-liberal policies. Bourdieu recognized the economic implications of globalization when he said:

“Globalization” serves as a password, a watchword while in effect, it is the legitimatory mask of a policy aiming to universalize particular interests, and the particular tradition of the economically and politically dominant powers, above all the United States, and to extend to the entire world the economic and cultural model that favours these powers most, while simultaneously presenting it as a norm, a requirement. (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 84)

The connection to neo-liberalism is clear. This economic approach has been widely accepted but it also has its critics. More recently, the fallacy of total confidence in the market has been demonstrated many times especially since the near implosion of American and European markets in 2008 that almost sent the world reeling into economic depression. Stiglitz (2008), warned of the problems with countries accepting neo-liberalism as the way to operate world economies. He cautioned about the problems of growing disparity in which a small elite reaps the benefits a neo-liberal approach can bring while working class people suffer, unemployment rises, social benefits are slashed and the standard of living of the middle class plummets. As he observed, “Today, there is a mismatch between social and private returns. Unless they are closely aligned, the market system cannot work well” (Stiglitz, 2008, p. 3), and further, “Neo-liberal market fundamentalism was always a political doctrine serving certain interests. It was never supported by economic theory”. Even a supporter of the market economy and global capitalism, Fukuyama, was alarmed at the current situation and he stated: “The current form of globalized capitalism is eroding the middle class social base on which liberal democracy rests” (Fukuyama, 2012, p. 1). These economists are most concerned about economic problems brought about by neo-liberal fundamentalism in the Global North. Yet, despite these very serious concerns raised by economic experts, neo-liberal policy continues to be applied worldwide to the very great detriment of development and education.

The situation is much worse in the developing world that still finds itself subject to the constraints imposed by international agencies that continue to espouse neo-liberalism as the dominant operating principle for world markets and for countries that wish to be part of these markets. Such agencies include the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, along with the Asian Development Bank and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). These organizations have tirelessly promoted neo-liberal initiatives as described in the documents of the Washington Consensus. As a result, privatization, deregulation and decentralization continue apace in the developing world and they have a great impact on the provision of education which is now viewed as a tradable commodity.

The proliferation of off-shore campuses of universities in the English-speaking world is well-known as are the kind of programmes they deliver, usually in English, with their implicit neo-liberal and market-oriented content. The countries of the Global South are given little opportunity to resist the neo-liberal agenda and many countries are struggling to meet the economic demands it implies. But economic hardship is not the only problem with this approach. Another issue that will be touched upon later in the paper is the cultural costs to a national psyche when education is delivered in a manner that does not match...
local sensibilities and that devalues local ways of knowing and learning (see Babaci-Wilhite, Geo-JaJa, & Lou, 2012). Although it is a given that education is a necessary element for social advancement and sustainable development, the kind of schooling one receives and the curriculum studied may or may not contribute to helping people reach their full potential and ready themselves for a functional role in society (Majhanovich, 2013a, 2013b).

The large and expanding number of tertiary education programmes offered in English globally is one aspect of the power and influence of the English language. English is also by and large the language of scientific journals, especially of those highly ranked on the international index. Even the UNESCO based journal, *The International Review of Education*, openly professes preference for articles in English. It is not surprising that many non-English academics resent the “free ride” English native speakers have when publishing in scientific journals (Van Parijs, 2007, p. 72). Academics face pressure to publish in English in highly ranked journals. Non-English speakers must overcome the hurdles of writing in Standard English with cultural or methodological norms alien to their context. This challenge speaks to issues of equality (Flowerdew, 2007). It also confirms the neo-colonial, hegemonic nature of English today.

**Global issues: the place of English in education systems and schooling**

In an age where the market exerts such a powerful force, and where the language of the market and of business is largely English, knowledge of English is highly valued as social capital. Hence, English has become an important subject in the curricula of public schools as well as of private schools. Ways of learning English can either involve taking it as a subject, or, quite often by having English as the MoI in other subjects. The rationale for using English as the MoI appears to be that in order for youth to be prepared to participate in the global market, particularly in areas of business and science, they must possess a certain mastery of English, although surely it would be preferable if those subjects were taught in the local or vernacular language.

English is therefore a prominent feature of the emergent global education system and knowledge economy alongside worldwide standards for education in priority subjects, and cross-national comparisons of student performance as indicators of education system quality linked to economic development. These features and their implications for education have been widely discussed, for instance, by Stromquist (2002) on the knowledge economy; Zajda (2005) and Zajda and Rust (2009) on general features of globalization and educational policy and research; Baker and Wiseman (2005) on global educational trends; Zajda, Daun, and Saha (2009) on aspects of nation building, identity and citizenship education within globalization contexts, and globalization influences on linguistic policy decisions (Bjork Holmarsdottir, 2009; Brook Napier, 2011).

African states have probably felt the greatest impact of the neo-liberal approach and the dominance of English. Their education systems have also been subjected to European curricula and use of English or other powerful European languages as the medium of instruction, all in the anticipation of successful participation in global markets. For example, King and McGrath (2002) described the challenges facing South Africa and other African states in developing education and training for development, under pressures of globalization, knowledge-society and English dominance. Further, as Brock-Utne (2013, p. 77) commented “No secondary school in Africa has an African language as the language of Instruction”: Clearly neo-colonialism and probably neo-liberalism are at play. The aid for education that African countries receive is often conditional on the use of a
European language and European materials in the classrooms. This has proved disastrous for the school children who have extreme difficulty in making sense of curriculum delivered in a language they do not understand. Despite years of research in Africa that link success in schooling to being taught in one’s home language (Babaci-Wihite, 2013; Benson, 2008; Bjork Holmarsdottir, 2009; Brock-Utne, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Brook Napier, 2003, 2007, 2011; Kimizi, 2009; Langenhoven, 2006; Mbekwa & Nomlomo, 2013; Nomlomo, 2007, 2008; Prah & Brock-Utne, 2009; Vuzo, 2007), the prevailing trend continues to privilege European languages as MoI in African schools and to downplay local languages. We may attribute this to the power of neo-colonialism, of the force of neo-liberalism, or, as Benson (2013, p. 284) posited, that education policy and practice tends to reflect a Northern and monolingual view of the world, something termed linguistic habitus (Gogolin, 2002) related to Bourdieu’s (1991) social theories, in which certain languages carry higher social capital. As Benson (2013) explained:

When applied to education, a monolingual habitus causes us to view a learner as deficient if s/he does not speak the dominant language used for instruction, when we should recognize and make use of all of the linguistic, cultural and experiential resources that s/he brings with her to the classroom. (Benson, 2013, pp. 284–285)

Clearly what Benson and many other language researchers call for is recognition of the importance of learning in one’s first language especially at the beginning stages of education. When proficiency in a dominant world language like English is required, that language should be taught as a subject by teachers trained in language acquisition techniques. Unfortunately, education policy makers in Africa as well as parents seem convinced of the need to promote European languages, especially English as the MoI despite the toll taken on the children subjected to schooling they find difficult if not impossible to comprehend.

The Asia-Pacific region

The situation in Asia is not dissimilar, and English is also highly valued as a necessary commodity. Before embarking on a discussion of implications of English in Asia, a disclaimer is needed. Asia is a vast territory, with many countries and diverse groups of people. The Asia-Pacific region is even larger, adding still more diversity and complexity. It would be impossible within the parameters of this paper to speak for this huge region. Thus, selected countries in the region are considered to highlight both the global influences and broad regional trends regarding language dominance, and also some measure of the diversity of within-country contexts and situations that reflect the global-to-local tensions.

Selected cases of English influence in the Asia-Pacific region

Countries that were never British colonies

In the following discussion, a distinction is made between countries never colonized by Britain, while in the subsequent section, cases of former British colonies are discussed. In many areas of Asia, particularly those that were never English colonies, knowledge of English is desirable on purely instrumental grounds, for participation on the global stage. Particularly for former non-colonies and even with some that were (e.g., Sri Lanka, Malaysia), the use of English as MoI currently does not usually come into play until the tertiary level. There has even been progress at the elementary level in using home languages that are non-dominant for the countries but that are spoken by local minority groups. Kosonen (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013) has long documented education policies in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam that have favoured the use of local non-dominant
languages for elementary education. The results in meeting the Millennium Development Goals in these countries have been most promising. Brock-Utne (2013) commented on the success of other Asian nations that have recognized the importance of using local or national languages rather than English in schools. She deplored the fact that African nations have not learned from the Asian experience:

Many Africans admire the visible success of contemporary Asia in all areas of the social and economic lives of Asians but are unable to easily see the connection between this scientific, technological and economic ascendancy of Asia and the wide use of dominant Asian languages as languages of instruction. (Brock-Utne, 2013, p. 82)

Several Asian countries have, of course, also tried the path of using English as MoI for science and mathematics, most notably Malaysia and Sri Lanka. But when test results in the subjects did not show the anticipated improvement, but instead fell drastically, the experiment was deemed a failure and the MoI returned to the local language. Brock-Utne (2013) cited the case of Sri Lanka which extolled the advantages of teaching science and technology in the local languages of Sinhala and Tamil:

The transition from English to the national languages as the medium of instruction in science helped to destroy the great barrier that existed between the privileged English educated classes, between the science educated elite and the non-science educated masses; and between science itself and the people. It gave confidence to the common man [sic] that science is within his reach and to the teachers and pupils that knowledge of English need not necessarily be a prerequisite for learning science (Ranaweera, 1976, p. 423, cited in Brock-Utne, 2013, p. 79).

In this country case, the rejection of English as a required tool for learning science and mathematics helped to valorize local languages.

Even in a country like Japan that was never colonized by Western powers, except for its occupation for seven years by the Allied Forces led by the US after World War II, and where linguistic life is carried out almost exclusively in the national language, Japanese, there is an awareness of the need for their citizens to have a working knowledge of English. As Nobuyuki Hino (2009) reported: in 2000, a government policy committee proposed that perhaps English should be designated “the second official language” of Japan (Hino, 2009, p. 105). In fact, Hino further commented “With the proposal for authorizing English as a second language in Japan, it almost looks as if the Japanese now regret that they have never been colonized by Britain or the USA” (Hino, 2009, p. 106). As is common elsewhere in Asia, there is in Japan an increase in the number of graduate schools, especially in the field of science and technology, where advanced degrees can be pursued entirely in English and no knowledge of Japanese is required. Dissertations can even be written in English, classes are taught in English and discussions are also carried out in English (Hino, 2009, p. 105). Hino (2009, p. 106) also reported that the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) declared in 2009 that at their annual convention papers should be presented in English, even though in Japan the language of conferences is normally Japanese. Resistance to this growth and privileging of English is to be expected, and indeed Tsuda (1997) decried the dominance of English, that its pervasiveness in academe results in:

(1) linguistic inequality to a great disadvantage of the speakers of languages other than English; (2) discrimination against the non-English speaking people and those who are not proficient in English; and (3) colonization of the consciousness of and identification with the English, its culture and people. (Tsuda, 1997, p. 22)

Tsuda (1997, p. 23) further lamented the “colonization of consciousness” resulting from dominance of English, that led to devaluation of local cultures including artistic representation, traditional education practices, local literatures and languages.
Although English has made inroads into Japanese academe, such that there are many higher education institutions that offer their programmes with the MoI as English, and some policy makers have even toyed with making English an official language to encourage citizens to learn it, it would appear that English is viewed solely for instrumental purposes. Despite Tsuda’s concerns, the Japanese by and large want to ensure that English texts should always stress the primacy of Japanese culture and language. Integration into English (Western) culture is discouraged (Hashimoto, 2007; Yim, 2007). The case of Japan illustrates the clear tensions between succumbing to the pressure of global trends, and English dominance, and retaining loyalty to local traditions and language.

Previously, the case of English influence in South Korea could have been considered parallel to that of Japan. However, recently Piller and Cho (2013) reported on a situation in South Korea that reflects a particularly disturbing example of English hegemony and colonialism. One of the most elite universities in Korea, the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), motivated by the desire to make the institution more competitive in the world market, has chosen to make English the only MoI, amazingly even extending this requirement to the learning of foreign languages such as Russian or Chinese that must be taught through the medium of English. This is a striking and unfortunate example of academic restructuring in Asia in the name of internationalization. According to Piller and Cho (2013), the human toll has been high, with a rise in suicides both among faculty members and students. The extreme difficulty of working in a foreign language in which the faculty and students were not proficient and in which they were unable to attain competency led to their acts of despair. Similar consequences and increased suicide rates were reported in Hong Kong under a new English mandate, as is discussed later in this paper (So, 2003; Van Deven, 2006).

In the case of KAIST, the restructuring included implementing English as the MoI to make it possible (under the guise of internationalization) to accept non-Korean students. However, as has been pointed out, rather than reflecting a move to the international that validates diverse languages and cultures, English MoI actually represents “the transfer of the US model of academic capitalism to another national context” (Kauppi & Erkkilä, 2011, cited in Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 31), and of course involves the neo-liberal impetus toward marketization and corporatization of universities (Piller & Cho, 2013, p. 31). Under the new structure, KAIST blatantly adopted the neo-liberal mission to focus on science and engineering with the aim of supplying highly qualified workers to industry at low cost. Piller and Cho (2013, p. 32) identified this as a transformation of higher education “from the service of the common good to a capitalist enterprise”. South Korea might be considered an extreme case for our overall argument, involving a forced acquiescence to global trends and influences regarding English and a denial of local cultural and language traditions.

In the case of Cambodia, the work of Kosonen (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013) who is optimistic about the way policies for elementary education include provision in both the Khmer language as well as in many of the local indigenous languages was noted above. However, it is a different story at the tertiary level of education and in the so-called shadow education sector where parents secure tutors often at considerable expense to teach their children a working knowledge of English. Clayton (2006, 2007), who had considerable experience in Cambodia, explained that the push for English in Cambodia (a former French colony) can be seen both in political and economic contexts. After the Paris Peace Accords of 1991, Cambodia began its transition to becoming a democratic nation, strongly supported by the United Nations, which set up the United Nations Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). Although originally bilingual in French and
English eventually prevailed as the preferred language of UNTAC. According to Clayton (2007, p. 101), more than 60,000 Cambodians who worked for UNTAC during its two-year mission needed some proficiency in English. **When Cambodia joined ASEAN in 1999, the demand for English became even greater**, as the working language of ASEAN is English, documents are prepared only in English and there are no translation services. Illustrating the extensive reach of the neo-liberal agenda, it is interesting that within its transition to a democratic state in the 1990s, Cambodia adopted a constitution that proclaimed its acceptance of a free market economy system which was to be integrated into the world economy.

In the case of **Taiwan**, the growing global influence of neo-liberal policies and ideas about autonomy emerge in the picture too. **In the “deregulation” and “democratization” thrusts that were evident in national reform policies**, however, Yang (2013, p. 13) has argued that while indigenous knowledge, traditions and culture were no longer suppressed, they were marginalized in the face of attention given to Western forms of knowledge, and to global priority subjects such as mathematics and science, and English. In the current era, Taiwanese educational reform policies have addressed a concerted desire for participation in the global knowledge economy, for global competency, and global cultural awareness as laid out in a 2012 White Paper (MOE, 2012, cited by Yang, 2013, p. 15) that was accompanied by a far-reaching plan for 12 years of compulsory schooling to be implemented in 2020. The contemporary policy thrusts for education in Taiwan exemplify the argument of the overriding influence of neo-liberal policies within broader globalization influences, but within the country there are contextual factors and other needs that have to be considered for a full understanding of the case. For instance, the degree to which English dominance features in the Taiwanese case recalls the case of South Korea described earlier in this paper: How far will the Taiwanese policy go to further international participation and modern citizenship goals? **Will English dominance result in the sacrifice of local languages? What real impacts and benefits will accrue to ordinary people in Taiwan rather than just to the elite?**

In **China**, one sees a complex situation involving multiple dominant languages (Mandarin Chinese and English) wielding overriding power and influence, and juxtaposed with some 55 ethnic groups of which some 53 have distinct local languages, enormous regional and urban-rural differentials in development and in language usage, and a tumultuous history of multiple colonizations and local rule. The major ethnic minority groups are the Uygur, Tibetan, Zhuang, Mongolian, and Hui in five autonomous regions geographically distant from the centres of power in the east. In the first half of the twentieth century pluralistic policies did accommodate native languages, but subsequent integrationist policies for promotion of Mandarin accorded minority languages little recognition. From the late 1970s, pluralistic policies allowed return of native language use and recognition alongside Mandarin, but as Postiglione (1999) pointed out, major challenges to state schooling existed regarding education policies in relation to language and religion, particularly in areas outside the main urban conglomerations and in remote rural provinces (see also Feng, 2009). More recently Lee (2004, pp. 45–49) reported on the significant regional disparities and inequities in China. The case is distinctive, not only because of its geographic size and immense population, but because of the importance of English as the dominant language competing with Mandarin Chinese, both with huge numbers of speakers within the country, and with English influences invading China as a counterpart to the country’s drive to become a global economic power.

**English has been a crucial element for China’s “Four Modernizations” programme** which has focused on modernizing agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology, but also involved the promotion of English teaching throughout the country.
Since the late 1970s the government began developing College English Syllabi for Science and Technology (syllabus issued in 1985) and for Arts and Social Science students (syllabus issued in 1986). The tests to measure students’ success in the respective English programmes were called CET 4 (College English Test, Band 4) for the Science and Technology students and CET 6 (College English Test, Band 6) for the Arts and Social Science students. Feng commented that these tests “have been nationally perceived as the key to personal and institutional success” since first administered nationwide in 1987” (Feng, 2009, p. 86).

In the interim, China has moved forward with its programme of English instruction, such that now pupils begin English in grade 3, receiving two hours of English per week progressing to four class hours per week from grades 5 through the end of secondary school in grade 12. Students are expected to successfully work through nine graduated proficiency levels of English by the end of senior secondary school. Feng (2009, p. 85) noted that “the overwhelming majority of over 226,000,000 students in primary and secondary schools and in universities study English taught by a strong force of English teachers numbering 850,000 in the country”. In tertiary education students take as much as 10% of total credits in English and are expected to complete English proficiency tests depending on their subject specialty (Feng, 2009, p. 90).

As noted above, there are regional and urban and rural disparities in China and this is evident in the provision of English instruction. The developed regions of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong have access to superior infrastructure resources that will impact the language proficiency and teaching pedagogy. This contrasts with the situation of inland regions such as Gansu, Hubei, Hunan, Anhui and Sichuan (Feng, 2009, p. 92). Nevertheless, the government of China continues to promote policies to realize the goal of increasing the number of citizens who can function at least to some degree in English.

English in former British colonies
Among former British colonies, a range of cases illustrates the common issues and the complexities. For Bangladesh a priority in nation building was to assure distinction from Pakistan; hence Bengali education was mandated to help maintain a distinct Bangladeshi identity. However, the need for English is recognized but tends to be accessible mainly to elites and the wealthy (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007). In India and Pakistan, real competence in English is mainly possible for the elite only who access quality classes primarily in private educational institutions. Social and economic inequalities are growing as a result of policies for English (Agnihotri, 2007; Rahman, 2007). As a result of the strong colonial legacy of British rule and widespread British-style education in India, the ability to speak the “Queen’s English” became a prized asset not disconnected to the upsurge in outsourcing to India to capitalize on the availability of educated workers who speak impeccable English.

The situation in Hong Kong is somewhat different. In the former British colony, English has long been an official language in Hong Kong and many schools offer English MoI. Most Hong Kong universities have English as the MoI. Once Hong Kong was returned to mainland China in 1997, Hong Kong began to develop a policy of biliteracy (in Cantonese and English) and trilingualism (in Cantonese, Putonghua and English). The government wishes to stress mother-tongue (i.e., Cantonese) education as primary. Indeed, as Li (2009) noted, in Hong Kong, Cantonese has always been the language of communication for the majority of Hong Kong citizens. That makes English more of a second or foreign language for the majority of people. This is especially true because the majority of citizens in Hong
Kong have little opportunity to practise or use English in authentic situations. Despite the government’s best efforts to encourage quality teaching of English, there have been problems regarding the testing regime put in place to ensure “quality control” for Hong Kong ESL/EFL teachers. Local Cantonese speaking teachers of English in Hong Kong schools and colleges were required to pass demanding proficiency tests in English and in English pedagogy in order to retain their licences to teach. Teachers who were native speakers of English, many of whom had no particular preparation to teach English as a foreign language (unlike their Hong Kong teaching peers) were exempt from the assessments. The human toll has been very high for many of the Hong Kong teachers, some of whom have committed suicide or have had to leave the teaching profession (So, 2003; Van Deven, 2006).

In contrast, Malaysia offers an interesting case of policy changes as an effort to accommodate the demands of the global economy, but balanced by the desire to promote national languages to secure national and ethnic unity. After independence Malay replaced English as the language of instruction throughout the system in an attempt to diminish the effects of colonialism. The previous Cambridge University A-Level and O-Level examinations were replaced by Malaysian certificate examinations. However, by 2002, concerned that citizens were ill-equipped to participate in the global economy, the government reversed itself and once again mandated English as the language of instruction for mathematics and science from the primary level upward. Their rationale for this was that competent English speakers would be required to ensure success in the fields of science, information technology, and business. The change in policy created difficulties in finding sufficient numbers of teachers proficient in English to teach the content in English and in addition, they lacked suitable curriculum resources in English. The Chinese and Tamils, two other recognized ethnic groups, felt threatened by the extra class time needed in English teaching of mathematics and science to the detriment of time available to teach in Chinese or Tamil. Eventually the policy was recognized as a failure; teachers were frustrated, test scores on international tests in mathematics and science were not improving, and the ethnic Chinese and Tamils were very restive over the perceived threat to their rights to education in their language. The programme ended in 2012 and the MoI reverted to Malay (or Chinese or Tamil in vernacular schools). Nevertheless, parents do value English as a global language and seek opportunities for their children to learn English perhaps in private schools or with private tutors. Private tutoring is especially prominent in (East and South) Asia while also growing worldwide, described as the growth in a shadow education system (Bray, 2009). Private schools and colleges with English MoI are proliferating. Although it is a given that language planning and education policy should not rest entirely on economic considerations but on the recognition of, and respect for, linguistically expressed cultural identities (Hashim, 2009), it appears that the dream of economic success trumps the strategies put in place to overcome the colonial past; the hegemony of English is evident in Malaysian education today. (For a fuller discussion of language policies in Malaysia and their implications, see Chan, 2007; David & Govindasamy, 2003; Gill, 2005; Hashim, 2009.)

Singapore sought a different linguistic solution from Malaysia after its independence in 1965 and proclaimed a policy of “pragmatic multilingualism” (Lim, 2009, p. 53 cited from Kuo & Jernudd, 1994, p. 72. (See also Gobernathan, Pakir, Kam & Saravanan, 1998). Singapore is sometimes termed a “sociolinguistic laboratory” but might more aptly be called a “laboratory of language planning” (Daming & Wei, 2003, p. 121) because of its deliberate efforts to formulate policies to change linguistic realities, such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign of 1979 (Da, 2013) and to chart a course forward in the interests of development.
Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil were designated as mother tongues and official languages while English, the former colonial language, was declared the fourth official language in policies carefully conceived to mitigate conflicts and to promote development. In addition, English became the official MoI in all schools on the grounds that then none of the other official languages would be favoured and English would be a “neutral” language linking the people to international science and technology, trade and commerce. Unlike Hong Kong, where, as mentioned above, it is difficult for most people to use English in authentic situations, as a result of this policy, Singapore has a population of “English-knowing bilinguals”, a growing population of people who consider English as their dominant language and who use English most of the time (Lim, 2009, p. 54). Lim (2009, p. 55) reported that by the year 2000, 70% of Grade 1 students reported English as their dominant language and the language used at home. English literacy of the population in 2000 stood at 70% up from 23% in 1980. No doubt the figure has grown in the interim.

Although the majority of Singaporeans are competent in English, there are some problems with this policy, namely, a displacement of the other ethnic languages. Part of the problem lies in the fact that Mandarin Chinese is the official language while ethnic Chinese in Singapore actually speak other dialects of Chinese, and under the strictly enforced language policies these residents are losing their home languages of Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew and Hainanese, among others (Lim, 2009, p. 54). The growth in use of Mandarin and English has come at the expense of other Chinese dialects. The Statistics Singapore Newsletter (Fah, n.d.) reports that the Chinese resident population speaking English at home has grown from 19.3% in 1990 to 23.9% in 2000, an increase of 46.9%; those speaking Mandarin at home have increased from 30.1% in 1990 to 45.1% in 2000, a growth of 78.1%. In contrast the number of those speaking Chinese dialects at home has fallen from 50.3% in 1990 to 30.7% in 2000, a decrease of 27.7% (Fah, n.d.; see also Yeo, 2012). There are stark differentials between an “English-knowing elite” and the “English-lacking masses”, as Daming and Wei (2003, p. 143) characterized it. However, in an interesting illustration of policy versus practice, the youth of Singapore have developed their own hybridized brand of English known as Singapore English, or Singlish, which incorporates Chinese and Malay terms and structures into English expression. The government has tried to discourage the use of Singlish with a “Speak Good English Movement” (or, in reality, the “Queen’s English”), but their efforts have largely been in vain. “Singlish” has crept into products of the entertainment industry and is even found in English schools where teachers lapse into this version at times. It is not really a serious problem if people recognize that Singlish is one of the “world Englishes” and is an acceptable version of the language. Also it is probable that most Singaporeans, having been schooled in Standard English are able to use that version where it is appropriate along with the hybridized version in more informal settings. It would be interesting to examine the extent to which English in Singapore is viewed truly as the dominant language or whether it really is accepted because it is seen instrumentally as the global language, but not the language tied to Singaporean’s ethnic identities. Recently young people have tried to revitalize the dialects. Phneah, a student of Nanyang Technological University, in 2013 started an online petition seeking to have dialects reintroduced in television and radio. Unfortunately, the response was disappointing but her efforts show awareness of the importance of ethnic languages as a key element of identity (Da, 2013).

As a contrasting case in point, Smolicz, Yiv, and Secombe (2003) reported on research with Cambodian refugees in Australia who survived their personal upheavals.
well to achieve academic success through the intensive English language programmes given them upon arrival in Australia, also successful passage through the English medium higher education experiences in Australian universities, but with the chance to continue and consolidate their learning of Khmer (their native language) as well as some Mandarin Chinese in community programmes supporting refugee groups. These researchers pointed out the significance of the case regarding language and education, in that the Cambodian refugee subjects’ acquisition of English, which was credited with enabling them to succeed in academe and in careers, did not come at the expense of their own language and cultural identity.

Conclusion
The cases in the Asia-Pacific region presented here illustrate many common threads, universal issues, local and internal contextual factors related to language and education, and to English dominance which is part of a global neo-liberal tidal wave of influence. What emerges is a picture of complexity within countries, some truly contrary cases and several cases with similar dilemmas. Perhaps in all instances one sees competing demands for attention and resources in the overall development agenda of countries in which language issues frequently fall down the list of top priorities, as the work of Lee (2004) revealed in terms of focus on other inequities.

There are costs incurred for the sake of English dominance and there are also opportunity costs as described by Piller and Cho (2013), and Majhanovich (2013b). At what price is English mandated and/or embraced as the desirable and necessary MoI and official language for progress and economic success? Certainly much research has shown that a major price paid is in the loss of or diminution of traditional, indigenous, and minority languages. Linguistic rights and cultural revitalization movements may not be sufficiently strong to stem the tide of dominance. The opportunity costs include, but are not limited to, enhancement of cultural diversity and tolerance as well as of linguistic equity, and preservation of traditional culture. Acceptance of new, hybridized forms of language such as Singlish, might be seen by some purists as loss of intact tradition and “pure language”. The loss of appreciation for local context and the failure to recognize the importance of seeing macro-level global, and national/regional issues against the lower-level meso- and micro-level realities can be folly, as Arnove (2013) and others have pointed out in comparative education research framed in terms of the global to local dialectic, which is well illustrated with language dominance issues. The Asia-Pacific region is replete with examples of the need to focus carefully on the internal conditions in any one country, or even a tier of countries linked by similar levels of development, to understand the full story. However as Kosonen (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013) has shown in the case of Thailand and Cambodia, and Smolicz et al. (2003) in the case of Australian Cambodian refugees, English development does not have to come at such a cost or price.

Consequently one might argue that policy-practice issues in comparative education research remain an important area of scholarship, and certainly in the Asia-Pacific region under purview here there is a rich research tradition pointing to complexity as well as to universal issues. But still more micro-level studies, and policy-practice studies, are desirable to highlight the inequities, the contradictions, and the complexities of how language and education play out in a local or national landscape pervaded by global influences and neo-liberal economic policies. The nature of comparative education research is such that these tensions when elucidated, lead to needed debates over local issues that will result in real understanding in the global and local contexts.
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