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## Book Review: English in Southeast Asia: Features, Policy and Language Use

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*RELC Journal* 2014 45: 101

DOI: 10.1177/0033688214522723

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## Book Reviews

RELC Journal  
2014, Vol. 45(1) 101–106  
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LOW, Ee-Ling, Hashim Azirah (eds)

*English in Southeast Asia: Features, Policy and Language Use*

(Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012), 394 pp. ISBN 978-90-272-4092-9 (Hbk). €95.00, \$US 143.

**Reviewed by:** Stephen J. Hall, Sunway University, Malaysia.

The complexity of Southeast Asia often challenges those who wish to describe the unifying features and the more obvious diversity of the linguistic patchwork of this region. There is always a difficult balance between focusing on discernible features as in the well-researched area of Singaporean English and less accessible situations where English is a *lingua franca* rather than an official language. Over 300 pages and 20 chapters seek to address this diversity through a mix of scholarship and original research into the features, policy and use of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN's) working language. English in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines, Thailand and Hong Kong (China) is described in this 'Varieties of English Around the World' volume.

There are three parts to this wide ranging and carefully selected collection. Part I describes the features of English in each country or territory. Part II is a section on policy, which describes the historical context and the planning of English language for each country. Part III focuses on language in use, and the concluding Part IV is an up-to-date bibliography of research into English in Southeast Asia.

The ambitious nature of this collection of 20 chapters is signaled in the editors' introduction, in which they acknowledge the asymmetry of extensive earlier study into some national contexts and not others. Southeast Asia is therefore defined not as a fully comprehensive representation of the region but is limited to select nations. These are the nations in which there is well-defined English for Speakers of Other Languages Research. This limitation is itself a commentary on areas in need of further research, such as the use of English as a *lingua franca* in Burmese development projects. Chapter 1 is a judicious start as Kirkpatrick provides the context and definitional challenges of varieties of English used amongst the complexities of code switching. Code switching is an area which is not a major focus in this collection apart from Chapter 15, yet other research in this collection provides data for those interested in this aspect of everyday communication in the region. Descriptions of the phonological features of Singaporean, Malaysian, Brunei, Philippine and Thai English provide a wealth of research-based material for those teaching or researching spoken English.

Chapter 2 on Singaporean English has a rich phonemic inventory while both this chapter and the following one on Malaysian English describe lexical and syntactic features which could inform practice for those addressing the challenges of international intelligibility. The inclusion of Hong Kong English may seem a curiosity, but if the reader considers the number of Cantonese speakers in the region and the focus on suprasegmental features, stress patterns and grammatical changes, one can appreciate the contribution. The Hong Kong chapters do provide an added awareness of the features and challenges that mark a stressed-timed language from a syllable-timed language, a dynamic for many of us working in spoken English teaching or teacher education.

Descriptions of the historical contexts and language planning in Part II follow the geographical ordering of the first part. The ten descriptive chapters in the second part draw on earlier research and government policy by necessity and are very comprehensive at the historical macro-level, if somewhat measured in their critical analysis of language policies. The descriptions of the national contexts suggest a complexity within each political setting as well as great regional diversity. English in Thailand is clearly very different from the Philippines. The outlining of issues also provides valuable background for what is an ongoing debate which should develop as nations move towards 2015 ASEAN integration.

Part III is a section with more specific contexts. These include settings and functions which are under researched or recently developed such as Electronic English in Malaysia or Southeast Asian pop culture. Curiously, MTV Asia, a regional phenomenon, is not part of the latter. Chapter 16 links curriculum and World English to teacher education practice in Japan, while posing interesting questions about the gaps between theory and practice, also articulated in recent World Englishes discussion (Kachru, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Matsuda and Matsuda, 2012). English in Southeast Asian law, code switching and politeness strategies are described in depth and it is here where a discerning reader may tease out generalizations beyond the analysis of particular South East Asian settings.

Part IV is a rich resource for researchers as over 20 pages describe works on English in Southeast Asia. This bibliography covers scholarly writing about Brunei, Hong Kong (China), Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand and uses the framework of linguistic features, language policy and language in use. Scholars are provided with a valuable stepping stone into the rich diversity of English of Southeast Asia in this part and in the preceding chapters. This diverse and well-structured book does much to advance our understanding of English in Southeast Asia.

## References

- Kachru BB (2005) *Asian Englishes: Beyond The Canon*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
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- Matsuda A, Matsuda PK (2010) World Englishes and the teaching of writing. *TESOL Quarterly* 44(2): 369–74.