

## ENGLISH COURSEBOOKS IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

**Bao Dat**

*Monash University*

*(Received: 10/10/2013; Revised: 12/12/2013; Accepted: 20/01/2014)*

### ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the current trends and types of ELT materials published and employed in Southeast Asia with all their major contents, their strengths and weaknesses. It also mentions local teachers and learners' perception of local materials and summarizes the reviewer's evaluation of some major coursebooks produced in the region together with brief recommendations for further achievement of learning value and impact.*

### Current trends in ELT materials in Southeast Asia

A number of great efforts have been made in the region toward upgrading the quality of English materials in the region, based on the belief that growth in English literacy plays an essential role in every country's economic orientation to the global community (Yin Mee 1996, Kam 2004, Fen 2005, Soon Fen 2005). Such developments, however, do not mean that language education in Southeast Asia is advancing toward the Western communicative approach but rather decisions on how to teach and learn are made in consideration of each country's educational, economic and social factors (Komin 1998). In fact, many scholarly efforts in producing national materials rest on the understanding that English materials and methods are a sub-society which reflects the values, beliefs and economic realities of the country to which they belong (Baker 2003; Buripakdi and Mahakhan 1980).

This view of English coincides with findings from Katrin's (2003) survey

on what the English language means in today's Southeast Asian context. When 240 respondents in the Philippines are asked what culture English belongs to, 93.8% feel that English is an international language, 7.5% assume that it is an Asian language, 12% say that it is owned by the Philippines and surprisingly no one indicates that it belongs to Britain or the US. These findings raise the question of cultural ownership of English and bear implications for a more culturally sensitive curriculum. In the meanwhile, global courses continue to be imported and distributed widely throughout the region, which makes it difficult for the local textbooks to compete and survive. In this competition, the choice of which material to use is governed by such factors as state ideologies, parents' choice, and learners' and teachers' preferences, as well as the affordability and availability of the materials themselves. All of these elements characterize the nature of English language materials in Southeast Asia and create a relationship between domestic and foreign texts in which one type of materials

displays its strengths and weaknesses with some contrasting connection to the other.

### **Characteristics of Materials in Use in Southeast Asia**

English materials produced and currently used in the ASEAN member countries are seen to fall into two main categories: in-country coursebooks and regional coursebooks. I shall provide a picture of the salient features of these material types by stating what publishers produce each of them, what kinds of institutes employ them, as well the advantageous and disadvantageous nature of these books in relation to their particular contexts of use.

#### **In-country coursebooks**

“In-country coursebooks” or “domestic coursebooks” are expressions used among numerous teachers and students in the region to refer to what is known elsewhere as local coursebooks. They either cater for the educational objectives of individual schools or follow the national curriculum. To meet the educational guideline requirements, almost all ASEAN countries have established their own publishers and their Ministries of Education have listed the content to be covered and the related institutes or local publishers then create the books in accordance. Developers of domestic textbooks range from local to foreign writers and, less frequently, a collaboration between both local and foreign writers. Generally speaking, the materials produced in Southeast Asia demonstrate the following strengths:

- They have a voice that promotes the national identities, religions, and political viewpoints. Their texts cover a wide range of local cultural elements, such as traditional games, cultural celebrations, and everyday scenes

of night markets or hawker stalls.

- The characters in the books are recognizable to the learners in terms of who they are and what they do. In Malaysian textbooks, they take on local occupations such as hawkers, rubber-tappers and padi-farmers. In Vietnamese textbooks, they take part in the economic normalization with their former enemy the United States. In Philippine textbooks, they exist as heroes to demonstrate folklores about the country’s civilization. In Singapore, they speak English with vocabulary from the local dialects. In Indonesian textbooks, they have their own proper names, use local products, reside in customary housing and visit their neighboring landmarks.
- Many texts reflect the learners’ sociocultural behaviour, values, beliefs, and familiar experiences. A tired boy would take some sleep under a tree on the way home to his village, a girl going to the wet market to buy food for her mother would swing by at a fortune teller’s to consult him about her future concerns, school children before their teacher arrives would have fun by climbing out of the classroom window. Such familiarity enables the learners to discuss problems and events in their life, whereas they could not discuss with equal ease on foreign subject matters such as board-skating, horse-riding, baseball games, gender debate and children-parent disagreement often seen in imported textbooks.
- Their sensible practicality also

lies in the convenient connection between the materials and the local educational network - by following the local didactic ideology and examination system, by giving instructions in the learner's mother tongue to ensure understanding in how to perform tasks and exercises, and by offering friendly prices even for low-income students in remote areas.

Despite all this, in-country coursebooks have the following weaknesses:

- Suffering from limited financial support and poor market sales these courses lack the attractive design that imported books enjoy and thus do not look appealing to the learners.
- As many texts are translated from the mother tongue to English to make the content accord with the Ministry of Education's requirements, the translation is not always properly handled and occasionally results in linguistic inaccuracy, unintended effect and vague content. These oversights bother many teachers and take away their confidence in the value of the materials.
- Containing many relevant cultural topics, the materials may be useful for content-based courses but are less ideal for skill-based courses as they often lack scaffolding towards verbal skills development as one would expect of communicative activities. Many textbooks tend to put excessive emphasis on reading comprehension while neglecting appropriateness and

fluency of language in use.

- Some courses introduce an excessive amount of new vocabulary and syntactic structures which demands intense memorization. They are coupled with many uninteresting, tedious exercises which entail cognitive processing without affective engagement. Such components put a burden on the learner and take away the energy that could be invested in more meaningful communication.
- An overdose of local-culture ingredients can easily damage learner curiosity and the novelty effect of many subject matters. In many cases the cultural content seems too familiar and predictable to be interesting to the learners and thus offers little challenge to their creative mind. Some writers solely pay attention to common cultural practice, settings, and occupations in local contexts while ignoring less usual but more fascinating features about the local life.

### **Regional coursebooks**

These courses are developed in a few countries but are exported to and become accepted in many other countries. For example, many textbooks from Singapore have been popularized among schools in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Regional coursebooks are developed by a small number of affluent publishers based in several Southeast Asian countries such as System Publishing, Casco, Learners Publishing, Educational Publishing House, Singapore Asian Publications, and Hillview Publications. These texts share a number of strengths with in-country courses but also have two additional advantages:

- They have an efficient distribution network that understands how to enhance product affordability and work effectively with local distributors.
- Thanks to good market sales in different countries they enjoy better financial investment and design their books to be attractive and sellable.

Regional courses, apart from sharing similar weaknesses with in-country texts also suffer two main disadvantages:

- They reflect the reality that the English proficiency levels of students in the countries are not the same. For example, Thai students who use textbooks from Singapore would find it hard to cope with the challenges in them and would not get the most out of what the learning objectives should be.
- The question of what culture to include in the texts also poses a problem. Sometimes because a textbook has become successful in one school, it gains some confidence to be introduced for use in other schools without considering their community culture. For instance, Thai students who use books imported from Malaysia sometimes find it confusing to have to discuss rural lifestyles in Malaysia which are dissimilar to those in Thailand.

Compared to primary, secondary and high schools, tertiary institutes and vocational schools seem to have more autonomy in text selection. In many universities, the use of global texts is preferred over locally written texts due to wide options of choices, comparative perspectives, supplementary manuals,

appealing topics and the mental challenge found in imported materials. Some university programmes even compile and self-publish their own course by pulling out chapters and portions from various imported textbooks. Although this is done out of the good intention to save time and smooth out the progress of students' multiple reading needs, such practice often takes place without much awareness of the copyright issue. Generally speaking, it is not uncommon for many learners to use a domestic or regional textbook at school or college during the day and an imported textbook at a private school in the evening.

### **Users' perception of course materials**

#### **Teachers' view**

Regional studies related to teacher perception of ELT materials show the overall tendency to welcome textbooks which are flexible enough for painless adaptation and which include pedagogical support. In a study of 100 Javanese teachers' beliefs about materials in use, Zacharias (2003) learns that 67% of the respondents prefer materials published in English speaking countries, 7 % welcome locally produced materials, 17 % go for a combination of both sources and 9 % express no particular preferences. In explaining their support for imported texts, the respondents mention teacher manuals, a component absent from many Indonesian textbooks, which makes the teachers increase their workload if they wish to make adaptation.

Most teachers refuse to adopt but tend to adapt the materials to suit their own inclination and their adapting skills vary a great deal depending on individual experiences, training backgrounds and L2 competences. A large number of teachers in Southeast Asia suffer the notorious reputation of being incompetent language



users and pedagogically unskilled teachers. Tickoo (1991) reports a series of studies conducted in rural schools of a third-world country where it was found that teachers often provide poor models of English to their students. As a result, many Southeast Asian students proceed to college with poor communication skills in English and fail to cope with the demanding level of English used in universities.

Despite this, many teachers prove to be highly innovative and resourceful course developers. In a study on 180 teachers in Thailand, Kajanaphoomin (2004) learns that most teachers do bring supplementary materials into their classrooms, especially local magazines, so as to raise their students' awareness of up-to-date local events and idiomatic use of language within their daily needs. In some classrooms at Assumption University, Bangkok the teachers not only invite learner response to creative texts such as short stories, poems, local magazines and personal diaries, but also arrange for their students to write novels, publish fiction, construct drama scripts, make feature films, and recite poetry in public events – some of these activities would be hard to find even in some of the best global textbooks. Without much training in the communicative tradition, these innovators have stimulated their students' desire to learn. They are valuable resources that materials publishers should seek out, provide further academic training for and turn into materials writers or consultants for their own countries.

### **Learners' view**

A number of research studies in the region point to learner preferences for flexible materials which leave room for the learners to discuss issues related to their immediate concerns and compatible to their cultural values. In an investigation

into learner beliefs conducted by Klipbua (2002) at Assumption University in Bangkok, 100 Thai students are asked to identify the most important factor between the teacher, the learner, parents, and the material in their English learning success. 64% of the respondents choose "the learner" as the most influential factor of all, while 26% mention "the teacher." Only 8% say "the material" and less than 2% say "parents." Klipbua takes the striking difference in learner preference of teachers over materials to suggest that it is the teacher who should be in control of the material and not the other way round; and that materials should be flexible enough for teachers to adapt them in ways that would suit their students. Unfortunately, many global materials leave little room for such flexibility. Research on teacher beliefs conducted by Zacharias (2003) underlines the difficult relationship between teachers and coursebooks when many Indonesian teachers confess that they have difficulty understanding the cultural content of imported materials.

In another study of the favourite learning styles among 100 Thai students of non-major English at Assumption University in Bangkok, Choengsaksri (2003) discovers that the most desired activity type (among 75 respondents) for verbal skills is free-styled discussion in small groups in which students feel liberated from the strain of a heavily controlled classroom. 22 students in this study state that the task type they like the least is "debates" in which they are asked to articulate their own view and publicly confront the views of their classmates, something not encouraged in Thai culture where an agreeable, harmonious exchange of ideas is the key to building trust and interpersonal relationship. This is a culture-specific learning behavior that it is hard to imagine how global textbook writers

would deal with in order to propose a more appropriate style of communicative tasks.

### **Summary of a course evaluation project**

In my recent evaluation of ten textbook titles written by regional scholars and currently in use throughout Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, I uncovered a number of striking strengths and weaknesses that are worth scholarly concern. The outcome of this study has contributed as a book chapter in *The ELT Materials World* edited by Brian Tomlinson and published by Continuum London 2008. In this publication I also discussed data gathered from interviews with 42 English teachers, policy makers and administrators in Southeast Asian countries with regard to their own recommendations for the improvement of course materials.

Among many positive features is the inclusion of cultural knowledge and national identity, with the content being connected with the learner's knowledge and cultural background. There is an awareness of regional events, especially current social phenomena and problems in the region which provoke thoughts and reflect what Harrison (1990: 1) considers as the "variety and essence" of the peoples. Worth noticing is also the awareness of the need for global integration, which goes along the line with what Krasnick (1995) has anticipated about how English by the year 2020 will take on a greater role in bridging the separation of language and culture in Southeast Asia. In this regard, most courses articulate the ideology that English not only serves as an instrument for technological exchange and integration into the global expertise and economy as well as social advancement.

Some outstanding drawbacks include uncommunicative use of English due to the heavily form-focused nature of the course.

Although many readings are controversial enough to inspire divergent thinking, they tend to be followed by tasks eliciting universal knowledge rather than inviting critical judgment. The exposure to English in use is far from authentic as many tasks for developing speaking skills often lack a real communicative purpose. Occasionally people from the same country who speak the same mother tongue find themselves communicating with one another in English without a clear reason to do so.

The consistency in appearance, content and method is also seriously lacking. For example, some units in the same course are much better written than the others; questions in one chapter may be much more interesting than those in other chapters. Some activities guide the learners through reflecting on their own experiences while such inspiration is missing from many other units. Such inconsistency also occurs in state policy and the reality of authentic language use. Pillay and North (1997) point out the conflict between the topic-based syllabus and the grammar-based examination, which leaves the teachers in a dilemma over what to teach. Sometimes there remains contradiction within the state policy itself. For example, the curriculum guideline of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (1987: 8) advocates that grammar should be instructed "in context and in a meaningful way" and not "in isolation or as discrete items". However, the revised guideline by the Ministry of Education 1989: 4) states that "grammar items can also be taught in isolation if teachers feel it necessary to do so." A third version by the Ministry of Education (1990: 5) then advises teachers to "stimulate students to think and question through the use of challenging and thought provoking stimuli and meaningful activities."

## Conclusion

There is a general need more interaction and investment to happen among course developers in Southeast Asia together with more adequate training in materials development. Local texts need tremendous improvement in which grammar is not taught in isolation from real world use but is closely linked to it; and learners need to see more evidence of how the knowledge and skills they learn can operate in the real world.

There is also another need for the curriculum to become more decentralized to allow for the diversity of levels, contextually relevant content, teachers' choice of what materials to use, as well as direct connection between language functions and the communicative needs of local communities. At the present moment this "free market" ideology seems hard to translate to reality since most states continue to exercise control over a standardized examination system. Equally urgent is the aspiration for textbooks in the region to reach some degree of standardization so that students in various localities in the country could benefit from the same standard of education. For example, the requirement for English in public schools should not be different from private schools. Other educators, in contrast, suggest that there should be

multiple versions of texts to serve differing levels and needs.

Materials writers who have experiences with the mainstream contexts of Western classrooms might want to consider the challenge of developing textbooks for Southeast Asia, taking such opportunities to add a new dimension to their academic expertise. Arguably, mainstream knowledge needs to be linked with the understanding of local contexts in which they are to apply this knowledge (Adamson 2005; Ferguson and Donno 2003). Eventually, materials in Asia need to expose learners to language in use in many different types of interactions and with different types of speakers (Tomlinson 2005). In a discussion on the mismatch between instructional and learning strategies, Biggs (1994) warns the world of the wholesale import of Western methodologies and assumptions about learner beliefs and attitudes into Asian settings. Razali (1992) emphasizes that in prescribing a method or a textbook, one must first consider all the constraints of the classroom setting for what the prescription is intended. Kachru (1994: 241) further suggests that "approaches to the teaching of English developed in the Western contexts cannot be accepted without question for the non-Western context."

## REFERENCES

- Adamson, J. (2005), 'Teacher Development in EFL: What is to be Learned Beyond Methodology in Asian Contexts?' *The On-line Asian EFL Journal*, Volume 7 (4) Article 4.
- Baker, W. (2003), 'Should culture be an overt component of EFL instruction outside of English speaking countries? The Thai context', in *The Asian EFL Journal Volume*, 5 (4).
- Baron, D. (1990), *The English Only Question: An Official Language for Americans?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Biggs, J. (1994), 'What are effective schools? Lessons from East and West', in *Australian*

*Educational Researcher*, 21(1).

- Buripakdi, C. and Mahakhan, P. (1980), 'Thailand', in T. N. Postlethwaite and R. M. Thomas (eds), *Schooling in the ASEAN region*. London: Pergamon Press, pp. 223-272.
- Choengsaksri, N. (2003), *An Investigation of Speaking Activities that Can Motivate Students in EFL Classrooms at the Institute for English Education, Assumption University*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Bangkok: Assumption University.
- Ferguson, G. and Donno, S. (2003), 'One-month teacher training courses: Time for a change?', in *ELT Journal*, Vol. 57 (1).
- Gorsuch, G. J. (2005), 'Developing "The Course" for College Level English as a Foreign Language Learners and Faculty Members in Vietnam', in *Electronic Asian EFL Journal*, Volume 9. (1) Article 10.
- Harrison, B. (1990), 'Preface', in B. Harrison (Ed.), *Culture and the Language Classroom, ELT documents 132*. Hong Kong: Modern English Publications and the British Council, pp. 1-2.
- Kachru, B.B. (1994), 'World Englishes: Approaches, Issues and Resources', in H.D. Brown and S. Gonzo. (eds.) *Readings in Second language Acquisition*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents, pp. 241-269.
- Kajanaphoomin, J. (2004), *The Effectiveness of Supplementary Materials EFL Classrooms: A Case Study on Nation Juniors, An English Language Student Magazine*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Bangkok: Assumption University.
- Kam H. W. (2004), 'English language teaching in East Asia today: An overview', in Ho Wah Kam and Ruth Y. L. Wong (eds.), *English Language Teaching in East Asia Today: Changing Policies and Practices*. Singapore: Intl Specialized Book Service Inc., pp. 1-32.
- Klipbua, D. (2002), *EFL Materials for the Thai Classroom: Designing Culturally-based Teaching Resources for Thai Students*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Bangkok: Assumption University.
- Komin, S. (1998), 'English Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> "Asian" Century', in W. A. Renandya and G. M. Jacob (eds.), *Learners and Language Learning*. Anthology Series 39. Singapore: RELC, pp. 263-271.
- Krasnick, H. (1995), 'The Role of linguaculture and intercultural communication in ASEAN in the year 2020: Prospects and predictions', in *Language and Culture in Multilingual Societies – Viewpoints and Visions*, Anthology Series 36, 1995. Singapore: Sherson Publishing House Pte Ltd., pp. 81-93.
- Ministry of Education (1987), *Guidelines for Writing Textbooks: English Language Form Two*. Unpublished Document. Ministry of Education. Kuala Lumpur.
- Ministry of Education (1989), *Curriculum Specifications for English Language Form Four*. Ministry of Education, Kuala Lumpur.
- Ministry of Education (1990), *Guidelines for Writing Textbooks: English Language Form Four*. Unpublished Document. Ministry of Education.
- Philipson, R. (1992), *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pillay, H. and North, S. (1997), 'Tied to the topic: Integrating grammar and skills in KBSM', in *The English Teacher*, Vol XXVI December 1997. Selangor: MELTA.



- Razali, N. (1992), 'ESL in Malaysia: Looking beyond the classroom', in *The English Teacher*, Vol. XXI October 1992. Selangor: MELTA.
- Soon Fen, W. (2005), 'English in Myanmar', in *RELC Journal – A Journal of Language Teaching and Research in Southeast Asia*, Volume 36.1 April 2005. Singapore: SAGE Publications.
- Suppiah, S. (1993), 'Cross cultural sharing and language teaching,' in *A Periodical for Classroom Language Teachers*, Vol. 15 No. 1 June 1993. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Tickoo, M. L. (1991), 'Learning language orientally: A case for RAGA, explorations and innovations', in *ELT Methodology*, December 1991. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, pp. 32-52.
- Tomlinson, B. (2005), 'The future for ELT materials in Asia', in *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 2 (2) Centre for Language Studies, National University of Singapore.
- Yin Mee, C. (1996), 'Language learning or culture learning: English Literacy lessons in a Singapore classroom', in *The Language – Culture Connection*, Anthology Series 37, 1996. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, pp. 189-205.
- Zacharias, N. T. (2003), *A Survey of Tertiary Teachers' Beliefs about English Language Teaching in Indonesia with Regard to the Role of English as a Global Language*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Bangkok: Assumption University.
- Zacharias, N. T. (2005), 'Teacher's beliefs about internationally-published materials: A survey of tertiary English teachers in Indonesia', in *RELC Journal – A Journal of Language Teaching and Research in Southeast Asia* 36, 1 April. Singapore: SAGE Publications.