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## ENGLISH-LANGUAGE IMPROVEMENT IN THAILAND: HYPE OR A NECESSITY?

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SPECIAL TO THE NATION

**LATELY** there has been increasing debate about the status of the English language in Thai society. Many arguments are made for and against the relevance of English its usefulness. Arguments made by Thai politicians take us back and forth about the role of English and distract us from the realities of this new century. This nationalistic faction believes that imposing the English language on Thai people is against their culture, heritage and unique identity. The same group also argues that Thailand was never colonised, so why bother to learn English. For them English is the language of the British colonies. It has no place in Thai society. Some others with a myopic vision believe that Thais should not be made to feel insecure and inferior because of all the hype about the importance of learning English.

It is a historical fact that in the 17th century the British did not go around the world to impose their language; they went to trade. Later, they forcibly occupied many countries in Africa and Asia. And of course they occupied North America as well. In their more than 300 years of history in Africa and Asia, they conquered many countries. This was followed by the creation of their own system of education, transport, communication and governance. The British did not necessarily force people in the colonies to embrace English. In many cases, the rulers of princely states and elites in the colonies willingly adopted English to have better relations with their new rulers. The spread of English in the colonies did not drastically change the native cultures and identities. In India, Malaysia and Hong Kong the English language became an alternate means of communication. It was always used along with several local languages and dialects.

In Europe the British did not impose their rule on neighbouring countries. Scandinavian countries were never colonised but they learned to do business with Britain. They willingly adopted English as a second language so that they could have better economic ties with Britain.

The days of colonisation are now history. Every country that was part of the British Empire is now free. The whole landscape has changed with the rapid expansion of communication technologies, transportation and financial markets. Colonisation has been replaced by the much more powerful forces of globalisation. The English language is no longer a cultural imposition; it is the language of the Internet. It has become the language of

the global markets.

In this context, a common language can be a powerful tool to succeed in globalised economies. So the old argument that language is integral to a cultural identity does not necessarily lead to separating it from other facets of culture. Language is just one part of a culture.

To be able to migrate to other countries and find a better paying job requires knowing more than one language. Knowing English is vital when a person wants to go to Britain, Australia or America for higher education or to explore options for a better job or a career. Proficiency in English becomes an essential requirement. One's culture is not going to help one to survive in a foreign land. Besides manners, work ethics and lifestyle issues, the language should be seen as an essential survival tool.

In Thailand, English teaching and learning problems cannot be solved only by employing "native speakers". Switzerland and many other European countries where teaching and learning English is a big success, do not rely on what my colleague Dr Sorin calls "na(t)ive" speakers, but on their own teachers of English.

In Asia, a good example is India. Although colonised for more than two centuries, India does not employ foreigners to teach English. Yet, it has a huge population that can speak and write English. It has produced its own English teachers. They are all graduates of Indian universities, majoring in English. Singapore and Malaysia also follow the same model.

If the Thai Ministry of Education is genuinely interested in improving English education, it has to do the following:

Improve the quality of Thai English teachers. Teachers of English have to be an inspiration for their students. It should be natural for young Thai students to say "If my teacher can do it, I can do it too". A white native speaker from Texas without a degree in English literature can never be an inspiration for Thai students.

If Thailand really wants to employ foreign teachers, then they must be qualified language teachers, not just a native speakers. They have to be trained in language or linguistics and speak at least one or more foreign languages.

There may be some similarities between Asean and the European Union's Bologna Process, which seeks to harmonise the region's higher education system, but in comparison to Europe, the diversity in education systems and economic development across Asean presents many more difficult challenges. There is still hope that both Thai politicians and civil servants

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will realise that English is playing a major role in the process of globalisation and that in the upcoming Asean Economic Community (AEC), the English language can become a common language and act as a glue that can bind the region together.

Another area of improvement that requires urgent action is the Thai popular media. There should be more English-language newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television shows focused on creating sights and sounds that can facilitate the learning of English.

So instead of wasting time on deciding what to call the English language - English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) - the Thai Ministry of Education should really be engaged in improving the quality of English teachers and of English teaching in Thailand.

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