

○ **P. LEE AND H. AZMAN (EDS.), *GLOBAL ENGLISH AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS: CHALLENGES FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATION***

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English language teaching in the primary school has been growing exponentially around the world with government rhetoric about globalisation, technological and economic development backed up by World Bank financial support. The outcomes have not always lived up to expectations with policy not being backed up by adequate resourcing. This book gives a wonderful insight into what is going on in a range of Asian and African countries both at national, school and classroom levels. It really does fill that ‘research gap’. It is interesting to see how different governments have dealt with the issues of global English and local languages, of unequal distribution of resources and of adapting curriculum and teaching approaches to local contexts. Many of the chapters in the book also provide snapshots of children and teachers in primary classrooms. There is the picture of children learning English in sometimes quite challenging contexts.

Many of the challenges are canvassed by the editors, Lee and Azman, in their first chapter. Teachers often do not have sufficient proficiency in English; nor is their teacher training adequate to help them teach in different ways; teacher shortages are common. There is the problem of urban/rural divide with schools outside urban areas having fewer resources and less access to English outside the classroom. There is the broader issue also of the place of English in terms of the other languages. To what extent is the teaching of English in primary schools ‘linguistic imperialism’ and how does it impact on local languages?

Azman describes the context in Malaysia which has recently mandated the use of English as the medium of instruction in all science and technology classes reversing the 1971 policy of Bahasa Malay as the sole language of instruction. She points to the fact that materials are still traditional and that, although English has a high status, it does not have much practical functionality for students. The English/ Malay issue is still politically sensitive.

Whereas policy in Malaysia is basically ‘unplanned’ (Baldauf, 1993/4), South Africa has developed a comprehensive and inclusive language education policy which addresses the issues of the range of languages, with primary aged children having access to home

language and two additional languages. Reed's research findings take the issue beyond an argument about conflict between the teaching of English versus teaching of local languages to one that argues for the better resourcing of both. Reed also discusses issues in the implementation of what, on the surface, seems an exemplary primary school language education policy and curriculum with the home language being the language of instruction and an additional language being introduced as a subject in Grade 1. In urban schools, which are mostly mixed backgrounds, there is often no main home language; in rural schools English as an additional language has high status but low functionality and is also poorly resourced.

Taiwan also has adopted what seems like a good syllabus for teaching English in the primary schools and the Ministry of Education mandated English teaching in 2001 in Grades 5 and 6 of primary school. Scott and Chen describe familiar issues with problems of teacher supply and training. In Taiwan there is the added issue of private coaching and exams. Because many students have access to English tuition outside class there is often a range of proficiencies in the class. The hegemony of pen and paper tests has also run counter to the spirit of the MOE syllabus. Similar to the situation in Korea, the notion of 'communicative language teaching' has been interpreted by both government and schools in Taiwan as the use of an audiolingual method.

The appropriateness of Communicative Language Teaching is questioned in the chapter on China PRC by Yang Rui. Large classes, inadequate resources and levels of teacher proficiency make it difficult to implement. Yang gives an interesting overview of the shifts in English language education policy over the years and argues that the potential dangers of linguistic imperialism could be addressed by 'ELT with Chinese characteristics' (p. 89), or a contextually-appropriate approach to ELT.

South Korea has taken a different approach with compulsory English teaching from Grade 3 taught by classroom not specialist English teachers. Lee describes also how all teachers were given inservice training and supplied with materials and textbooks. Children start with speaking and listening and reading and writing are introduced in Grades 4 and 5 respectively. The same issues have arisen: large class sizes of 40 to 50; wide ranges of student English proficiency with many receiving private coaching; a 'communicative' approach that is basically audiolingual plus TPR and students lacking interest because of the dull materials.

The chapter by Jones on elementary English teaching in Japan further highlights the conflict between government policy objectives, student needs and parent expectations and what schools can actually do. An extensive system of *jukus*, or coaching colleges, has emerged in response to the uniformity and traditionalism of government school

English teaching. The exam system, inadequate teacher training and adherence to traditional approaches have meant that English language teaching has not been responsive to younger learners.

The exam system is also an issue in primary schools in Swaziland as described by Dlamini and Hlophe. Students must pass the national exam in English to gain entry to secondary school. The authors support government moves in the teaching of English although it has little use outside the classroom but not at the expense of students gaining secondary education. I must also mention the chapters by Ishanah on Indonesian elementary schools which give the teachers' voice, the chapter by Suemasa on intercultural education in Japan and the chapter by Song on English teaching in North Korea.

I have some more critical comments on the book. The chapters are uneven in quality and their use of research; some chapters do not address issues of primary school English language teaching. I also feel that the issues raised could have been explored in more depth in the concluding chapter. The political/ policy contexts of English language teaching do not, for example, receive enough critical attention in the last chapter. Although there is some discussion of research into the critical age theories (but not enough on more recent work – see Nikolov & Curtain, 2000; Scovel 2000; Singleton, 2003) the academic/ cognitive issues are not the reasons advanced by governments for introducing English in primary schools. The final chapter presents a blueprint for the teaching of English which needed to draw more on the wider debates in the field.

These comments should not detract from the value of the book. The authors raise so many key issues:

- global English and local/ home languages: are they in conflict or is the issue more one of the quality of language education?
- teaching approaches: to what extent should they be adapted to fit local contexts or is the problem more one of unresolved tensions between syllabus, class sizes and exam-dominated systems?
- Resource allocation: rural/ urban or primary/ secondary?
- teacher training: specialist English teachers or grade teachers? How to gain requisite levels of proficiency?

The authors make an interesting point about the research gap into primary school English teaching. Much of the research is done as part of higher degrees and is therefore rarely published and does not make it back to the school, educational system or classroom level. There is a good research base in language education in primary schools in Europe,

but a gap in English language teaching in Asia, the Pacific and Africa. This book represents an answer to that issue and one can only hope that policymakers and teachers read the valuable findings.

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