Book Review

The Politics of English: South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific

Reviewed by:
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What is the state of English education in Asia, and what are the challenges governments in the region face in implementing English education policy? How does English occupy and influence the cultural spaces within these countries? How do English learners in Asia navigate their, at times, conflicted identities as students of a language with colonial origins? These are among the questions addressed within The Politics of English, a timely and thought-provoking discussion of the political, cultural, and educational issues and challenges related to English education within seven countries in Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea).

The Politics of English is straightforward in structure but ambitious in aim. Inspired by an Asia Research Institute workshop from 2009, the discussion of each country is comprised of two articles, with one meant to provide a “critical assessment of that country’s [English] language policy,” and the other focusing on English within a more specific cultural realm (p. vii). As a result, The Politics of English serves as both a broad primer and as a platform for more particular cultural studies. Readers from a range of academic backgrounds and with a variety of research interests will have much to gain from this collection.

In general, the chapters providing broad overviews of countries’ English language education systems follow similar structures and contain similar information, although of course the particular histories of each do inform the discussions. These chapters include a brief history of English within the country (usually, readers will find, within a colonial or post-colonial historical context), an overview of its current English education policy, and the challenges faced by educators, policymakers and students of English within the country. These overview articles are included as: Chapter 4 (Sri Lanka), Chapter 6 (Singapore), Chapter 8 (Malaysia), Chapter 10 (the Philippines), Chapter 12 (Japan), and Chapter 15 (South Korea). The chapters on India seem to lack this broader policy overview, although both do include some discussion of India’s state language policies.

The chapters focusing on English within more specific cultural areas are much more diverse in format and scope, and examine a variety of sources, ranging from poetry and popular music to government publications and advertisement campaigns. Each of these chapters provides a clear example of how broader topics related to English education manifest in various cultural settings. For example, in Chapter 5, Goonetilleke examines a selection of English-themed Sri Lankan poetry to explore the dynamic of English as a representation of colonial power and privilege, but also a potential means of upward mobility for Sri Lanka’s large rural population. Rajadurai, in Chapter 9, uses personal
interviews and diary entries from a group of Malay TESL students to examine how they manoeuvre between their Malay cultural and linguistic identities, and their identities as learners and speakers of English. In Chapter 13, Morita examines the use of loan words within Japanese government publications, detailing the discrepancy that can exist between the government and the general public’s levels of understanding of such language. Min, in Chapter 14, examines English’s inclusion within Korean literature, acknowledging both the mobility provided by English but also the related issues of gender, class, and social stratification (p. 284).

Taken as an entire collection, readers will note some recurring or overarching themes, which the editors detail in the concluding chapter (p. 303). The first is the conflict between states and societies viewing English as a “language of the Western other” versus a “global lingua franca”, and how they may, sometimes inadvertently, continue to position English as a linguistic “other”, even if it impedes English attainment. A second overarching point is the difficulty some English learners have with “reconciling national language pride with English language usage”, and the efforts governments may take to suppress or encourage English as a result. The third point deals with English education as a site of competition between Asian countries, as they vie for the economic and political benefits of a more English-proficient citizenry.

The Politics of English serves as a clear reminder that English education in an Asian context cannot be separated from power relations and the history of colonialism within the region. Although the economic and social utility of English proficiency is without question, learners of English sometimes have a tortured relationship with English learning, and states may encounter difficulties in their parallel promotion of English education and unified national identity. As English education in Asia continues to be a major topic in linguistics and international studies, these issues will undoubtedly persist as points of scholarship, debate, and contention. For academics, policymakers, and more casual readers alike, The Politics of English is a good place to start.

About the reviewer
Christian Allen is an English Teaching Assistant in the Centre for Applied English Studies at The University of Hong Kong. He conducts workshops, group discussions and one-to-one advising in support of English for Academic Purposes and general English enhancement. He also has experience as an EFL teacher in Taiwan.