

Exploring the Relationship between Intelligibility and Education

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Abstract

This paper features the interrelationship between intelligibility and education. Facts about world Englishes, varieties within ASEAN, English as an international language, intelligibility, and education were reviewed. Previews of related papers on comprehensibility of Englishes within ASEAN were presented. Analysis of the results of the comprehension tests from each Expanding Circle countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam were conducted. In using One-Way ANOVA, a significant effect of pre-school education, primary education and graduate studies on the comprehension scores the subjects gained from the comprehension tests was found. Further, this paper showed the differences of means and standard deviations of the Expanding circles' citizens' comprehension scores in a normal, bilingual, and international programs in various educational levels. At the end of this paper, we explored possible research opportunities on the localization of English within ASEAN in 2015 through curriculum designs tailored with diverse educational settings in the region.

Keywords: ASEAN Englishes, Comprehensibility, Curriculum, Education, Graduate studies, World Englishes

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) integration in 2015 has created numerous policies. One of the most striking guiding policies is the adoption of English as the bloc's "working language". While countries such as Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore are comfortable with the use of their *indigenized* Englishes, other nations such as Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam are racing to equip their citizens with the necessary English language's 'communicative' skills. The race to uplift the low English proficiency level (EF, 2011) of Thais has led Thailand's education ministry to hire hundreds of native speakers for *two-month* teaching. Their explicit preference of native speaker teachers against non-native teachers such as Thais and Filipinos is widely seen by subsidizing salaries of the former employed in public and private schools. While the Thai government proclaims the necessity of English competency, their policies contradict the very nature of why Thais must become competent in 2015 – that is the use of English to communicate with their fellow non-native speakers (NNS).

This paper previews the history of world Englishes and summarizes the thriving varieties of English within the regional association. The usage of English as an international language, global language or lingua franca leads to discussion on intelligibility, specifically comprehensibility among non-native speakers within the bloc. We tackle the three dimensions, namely World Englishes, intelligibility and education within ASEAN. The result of the comprehension tests revealed the differences of means and standard deviations in various education levels – pre-school, primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate studies. Further, we categorized the results in each educational level into normal, bilingual and international programs. Finally, we explored research opportunities on localizing Englishes teaching pedagogy within ASEAN.

1.1 World Englishes Paradigm

The recognition of World Englishes (WE) came into light in the early 80's. Kachru (1984, 1985) is widely for his WE framework. His framework revolves around the assumption that varieties of English, irrespective of being a native or non-native, should have equal footing, against the views of the former as a superior variety while the latter as an inferior language. Kachruvian model outlines the existence of three circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle, as Kachru (1992b, p. 356) defines it, is the "traditional cultural linguistic bases of English". These countries are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA). Meanwhile, the Outer Circle are countries formerly colonized by American and British powers such as Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines in Asia, and South Africa, Kenya, Ghana in Africa. These countries institutionalized English into their local language resulting in indigenized varieties of English and/or Englishes. Within this circle becomes the focus of WE discourse. The third is the Expanding Circle. English has no official status and the usage of English is often related to socio-economic gains and a privileged status in the community. A few examples of these countries are China, Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam in Asia, Germany, France, Italy in Europe, Brazil, Colombia in South America, among others.

1.2 Englishes within ASEAN

Following the historical categorization of English discussed in the preceding paragraphs, we look at the application of Kachruvian's model within ASEAN. Wilang and Teo (2012a) noted two circles, the Outer and Expanding Circles. Former Anglophone colonized countries are Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore while Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam fall in the Expanding Circle. Widely researched and established Englishes in the Outer Circle are Brunei English, Malaysian English, Philippine English and Singaporean English. One of the implications of the emergence of these varieties in 2015 is the use of various linguistic systems during NNS-NNS interactions. As we cannot find a common language among Aseans to use other than English, we will look at how over 500 million nationals of the ten countries attain highest forms of intelligibility.

1.3 English as an International Language

The notion that English is the international language (McKay, 2002), global language (Gradol, 2007), lingua franca (Jenkins, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2007), expanded research on mutual intelligibility. Intelligibility broadly refers to "intelligible production and felicitous interpretation of English (Nelson, 1995, p.274) and it is neither focused only to the listener or the speaker but rather an "interactional between speaker and hearer" (Smith & Nelson, 1985, p. 333). Moreover, Smith and Nelson (1985) tried to quantify intelligibility into three dimensions: *intelligibility* referring to the ability of the listener to recognize words or utterances; *comprehensibility*, the listener's ability to understand the meaning of word or utterance in a given context; and, *interpretability*, the ability of the listener to understand the speaker's intentions behind the word or utterance. The landscape of English usage continuously varies as people modify its forms and structures for their convenience. In the Outer Circle, as discussed above, varieties of English are established and sub-varieties are emerging.

In this paper, we focused on the comprehensibility of Outer Circle speakers' utterances to the listeners from the Expanding Circle nations within ASEAN.

1.4 English Status within ASEAN Member Countries

Despite the advances of research towards the use of English as an international language, Expanding Circle countries are moving backwards by still looking up to 'norm-providing varieties' as the perfect model of English. In the Expanding Circle, there is the strong presence of British Council, AUA, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, and many English language related businesses and organizations. While the Thai government funds projects for her citizens to learn English with native speakers, the Singaporean government spends her resources to standardize Singapore English.

The status of English in each ASEAN member country varies. Outer Circle countries use English as a second language by law except Singapore (officially one of the four languages) while in Expanding Circle countries English has no official status at all.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution Article XIV, Section 7 clearly states, “For purposes of communication and instruction, the official languages of the Philippines are Filipino and, until otherwise provided by law, English” (De Leon, 2002). On May 17, 2003, Executive No. 210 titled “Establishing the policy to strengthen the use of English language as a medium of instruction in the educational system” was signed into law by then President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declaring at Section 1.a “English shall be taught as a second language, starting with the First Grade” (Supreme Court E-library, 2004).

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia adopted in 1957 states in Article 152 - National Language and Other Languages that “the national language is the Malay language. In relation to other languages, the Constitution provides that: (a) everyone is free to teach, learn or use any other languages, except for official purposes.” (Hashim, 1976). In Malaysia, English is widely spoken and understood by majority of the population.

The upcoming integration of ASEAN in 2015 is favoring English to become the second language in the Expanding Circle countries albeit different educational systems and set-ups.

1.5 Background of Normal, Bilingual and International Education

Normal education in the Expanding Circle countries refers to the use of the first language as a medium of instruction in subjects like Math and Science except foreign languages such as English in Thailand and French in Cambodia. Bilingual education in the Expanding Circle nations refers to the use of two languages, both the first language and a second language, i.e. English, French and Chinese as the medium of instruction. For example, in Thailand, bilingual schools in the primary levels usually use Thai and English in teaching Math and Science. International education refers to the use of English as the sole language of instruction except in teaching first language subjects, for instance, Thai, Khmer, among others.

2. Review of RESEARCH on Comprehensibility of Englishes within ASEAN

Wilang and Teo (2012a) detailed the sociolinguistic views on the development of Englishes in the world and within ASEAN. In their paper titled, “2015 Timeline: Birth of Englishes and Varieties within ASEAN”, the upcoming integration toward a single community is challenged by the language differences among the ten member countries. Although the charter states English as a ‘working language’ of the bloc, it is a very broad statement that has wide implications on the language policy of each member country. For example, Bruneians, Filipinos, Malaysians and Singaporeans may use their indigenized Englishes comfortably during NNS-NNS interactions. The intelligibility issue focusing on comprehensibility of an utterance (Nelson & Smith, 1985) as well as the speaker-listener matrix by Levis (2005) laid the foundation on measuring the comprehensibility of spoken Englishes in the Outer Circle by the citizens of the Expanding Circle countries within ASEAN in the succeeding papers.

In a separate paper, Wilang and Teo (2012b) employed eight comprehension tests and a questionnaire (see also methodology) to gauge and understand the comprehensibility levels of the subjects from the Expanding Circle. They were able to indicate the most and least

varieties of English based on the nationality of the listeners as shown in Table 1. Cambodians, Thais and Vietnamese best understood variety is Malaysian English. Indonesians' most comprehensible variety is Philippine English while among Burmese and Laotians is Singaporean English. In contrast to the most comprehensible varieties, least comprehensible varieties are Bruneian English among Laotians and Thais, Malaysian English among Burmese, Singaporean English among Cambodians, Indonesians and Vietnamese.

Table 1. Most and least comprehensible Englishes based on nationalities

Englishes Nationalities	Bruneian English	Malaysian English	Philippine English	Singaporean English
Burmese		**		•
Cambodians		•		**
Indonesians			•	**
Laotians	**			•
Thais	**	•		
Vietnamese		•		**

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- denotes the most comprehensible variety
- ** denotes the least comprehensible variety

To understand the factors that are related to the comprehensibility levels of the Expanding Circle toward the Outer Circle's Englishes, five variables were tackled such as exposures to English through education, exposure to English through work experiences, exposure to English outside the classroom, exposure to English through social media, and exposure to English through travel and stay abroad. Based on correlation coefficients by using Pearson Correlation, Wilang and Teo (2012c) established positive significant correlations between graduate studies and comprehension scores at $p < .01$ level. Positive significant correlations were also found between comprehension scores and several factors, namely exposure through work experiences at $p < .01$ level, the use of social network and watching TV at $p < .05$ level, reading newspapers and watching movies at $p < .01$ level, and studying in Thailand at $p < .01$ level.

The myriad results detailed in the above papers led the researchers to further explore the relationship between comprehensibility and the educational backgrounds of the Expanding Circle citizens.

3. Methodology

This paper aims to answer the following questions: (1) Do educational levels have a significant effect on the comprehension scores of the Expanding Circle citizens? (2) How do comprehension scores vary among the three educational programs - normal, bilingual and international?

We have used the following procedures to answer the above questions. Firstly, we have sought the cooperation of various universities in the Expanding Circle. Only ten universities were able to respond positively, namely Assumption University, Chiang Mai University, Khon Khaen University, King Mongkut University of Technology North Bangkok, Mahapanya Vidyalai University, Mahidol University, Prince of Songkla University Hat Yai Campus, Rajamangala University Srivijaya Songkhla Campus and Rajamangala University Srivijaya Trang Campus in Thailand, and University of Riau in Indonesia. Secondly, we initiated the pilot testing after the experts' check on the inputs, questionnaire and comprehension tests. Thirdly, after adjustments based on the pilot testing results, we collected the data from ten universities. Fourthly, we analyzed the comprehension tests and questionnaire results. Lastly, we used descriptive statistics and Analysis of Variance to answer the two questions posed in this paper.

Two hundred and one subjects participated in this study. There are 12 Burmese, 21 Cambodians, 76 Indonesians, 12 Laotians, 68 Thais and 12 Vietnamese. All the subjects are enrolled in their undergraduate and graduate studies in the Expanding Circle universities.

The comprehension tests were derived from eight video clips spoken by native speakers from the Outer Circle countries. Two sample spoken texts by a Bruneian, a Filipino, a Malaysian and a Singaporean become the basis of forty multiple choice questions asked in the comprehension tests. Five questions in each test were given. Thus, in each variety of spoken English, listeners were tasked to answer ten questions in total. One point was credited to a correct mark while there was no point for an incorrect answer and an unanswered question. In addition, in each comprehension test, questions are categorized into two types – literal (3 questions) and inferential (2 questions). Wilang and Teo (2012b) define literal question as the explicit measurement of understanding a spoken text while inferential question is the measurement of understanding beyond the text. Examples of the questions are given below:

Literal Question (Question 1, Comprehension Test Booklet 7 – Singaporean speaker)	Inferential Question (Question 5, Comprehension Test Booklet 6 – Filipino speaker).
<p>Which of the following best describes the public transportation system?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="radio"/> a. The bus is slow at all times. b. The traffic is terrible in the morning. c. There are too many people in the bus. d. The driver drives too slowly. 	<p>Why does the speaker prefer Nescafe sachet sent by his relatives?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. To save his money. b. He just loves Nescafe. <input checked="" type="radio"/> c. There is no need to mix sugar and milk in the coffee. d. He is lazy.

In the questionnaire, the subjects were asked to tick their educational backgrounds based on the definitions of a normal, a bilingual and an international education discussed in the preceding sections. In addition, the questionnaire also inquired on the subjects' place of studies including their majors in the undergraduate and graduate programs.

4. Findings and Discussions

Table 2 provides details on the distribution of scores each nationality gained in the comprehension tests particularly on the educational levels (pre-school, primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate) and the types of programs (normal, bilingual and international) in each educational level mentioned.

Table 2. Distribution of comprehensibility scores among ASEAN nationals

Burmese															
	Preschool			Primary			Secondary			Undergraduate			Graduate		
	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int
<i>M</i>	23.00	27.20	40.00	23.00	27.20	40.00	23.00	27.20	40.00	23.00	27.20	40.00	23.00	27.20	40.00
<i>SD</i>	5.44	3.77	-	5.44	40.00	-	4.24	4.68	15.56	-	4.86	9.09	-	6.11	6.95
Cambodians															
	Preschool			Primary			Secondary			Undergraduate			Graduate		
	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int
<i>M</i>	18.45	18.00	-	18.45	18.00	-	17.24	23.50	-	14.50	22.40	19.43	24.00	23.67	17.80
<i>SD</i>	7.13	-	-	7.13	-	-	6.98	4.51	-	5.45	2.79	9.11	-	3.06	3.77
Indonesians															
	Preschool			Primary			Secondary			Undergraduate			Graduate		
	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int
<i>M</i>	21.35	23.00	-	21.36	22.00	-	21.47	20.29	23.00	21.72	20.22	23.00	21.00	25.00	24.10
<i>SD</i>	4.72	-	-	4.74	1.73	-	4.57	5.96	-	4.65	4.71	-	8.46	2.71	3.51
Laotians															
	Preschool			Primary			Secondary			Undergraduate			Graduate		
	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int
<i>M</i>	19.33	-	-	18.73	26.00	-	19.40	19.00	-	18.40	24.00	-	21.50	18.33	18.00
<i>SD</i>	6.29	-	-	6.21	-	-	6.11	9.90	-	6.45	2.83	-	9.26	5.32	3.51
Thais															
	Preschool			Primary			Secondary			Undergraduate			Graduate		
	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int
<i>M</i>	19.43	16.00	-	19.26	16.82	-	19.05	17.68	14.00	18.78	17.73	25.00	17.50	24.86	23.33
<i>SD</i>	5.81	2.87	-	5.64	4.41	-	5.82	4.53	-	5.86	4.44	-	4.43	7.27	7.37
Vietnamese															
	Preschool			Primary			Secondary			Undergraduate			Graduate		
	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int	Nml	Bgl	Int
<i>M</i>	21.00	22.00	-	21.89	19.00	-	21.89	19.00	-	21.89	19.00	-	20.67	19.00	23.00
<i>SD</i>	5.60	4.24	-	5.13	6.00	-	5.13	6.00	-	5.13	6.00	-	3.79	6.00	6.48

In the above table under the graduate column, it should be pointed out that Laotians and Vietnamese were enrolled in the normal graduate programs offered in the Thai universities. It means some Laotians and Vietnamese were studying in a foreign country but not necessarily enrolled in an international program. In addition, some Thais were studying in an international program but in a local setting.

The total score of the comprehension tests is 40. Only one Burmese who studied in the international program got the highest and perfect score of 40. This is reflected in the pre-school and primary educational levels in the above table. Regardless of the variation of means, Wilang and Teo (2012b) established a moderate comprehensibility level of the Expanding Circle citizens' comprehension toward the utterances of the Outer Circle speakers.

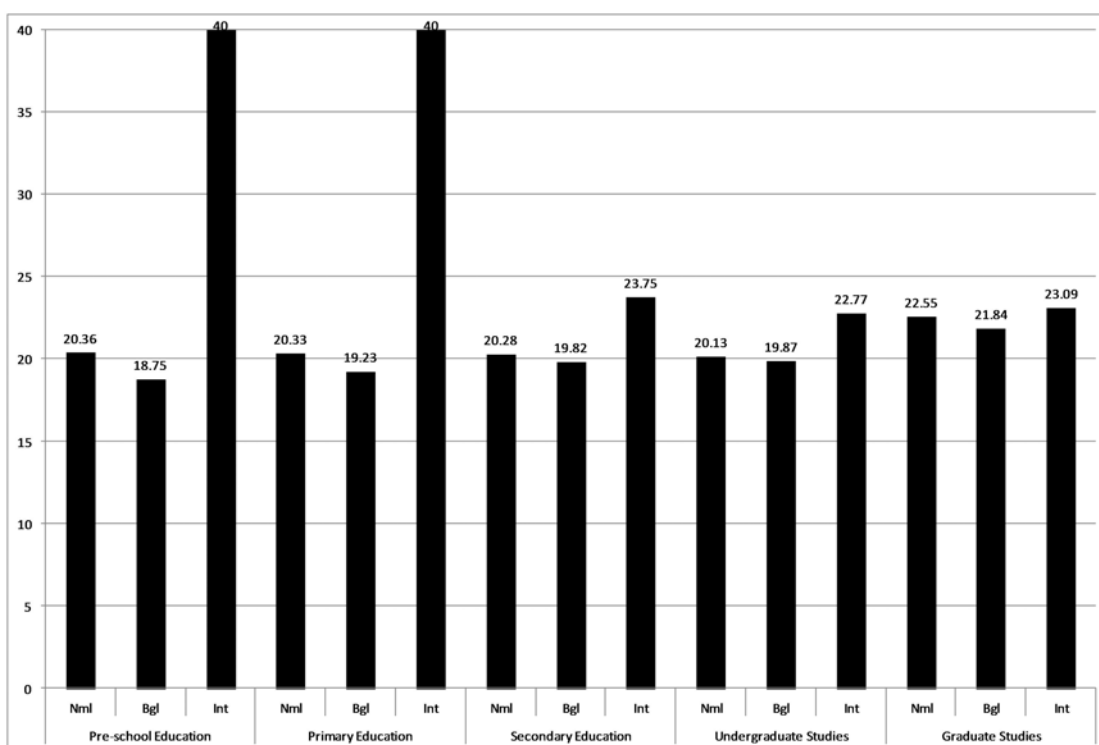


Figure 1. Comparative means of comprehension scores based on educational backgrounds

The above figure illustrates the totality of the ASEAN Expanding Circle's citizens comprehension scores based on various educational levels and educational programs. Based on the figure above, bilingual education produced the lowest mean of the comprehension scores while international education had the highest mean. Between normal and bilingual education in the pre-school level, the former is 1.61 higher than the later, 1.1 higher in the primary level, .46 higher in the secondary level, .26 higher in the undergraduate, and .71 higher in the graduate studies.

In the same figure above, the international program in all educational levels, namely pre-school, primary, secondary, undergraduate and graduate studies got the highest mean of

comprehension scores as compared to normal and bilingual programs. Between normal and international program, the difference of means is 19.64 in pre-school, 19.67 in primary, 3.47 in secondary, 2.64 in undergraduate, and .54 in graduate studies. The smallest difference in the mean of scores can be noted in graduate studies, as the only educational level having the positive significant correlation with comprehensibility (Wilang & Teo, 2012c).

Table 3. Summary of ANOVA for educational levels

Pre-school education					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	458.04	3	152.68	4.94	.002
Within Groups	6080.49	198	30.86		
Total	6538.53	201			
Primary education					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	427.69	2	213.85	6.93	.001
Within Groups	6110.83	199	30.86		
Total	6538.53	201			
Secondary education					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	58.35	2	29.18	.89	.412
Within Groups	6480.17	199	32.72		
Total	6538.53	201			
Undergraduate studies					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	100.57	3	33.52	1.02	.382
Within Groups	6437.96	198	32.68		
Total	6538.53	201			
Graduate studies					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	666.08	3	222.36	7.46	.000
Within Groups	5871.54	198	29.80		
Total	6538.53	201			

Based on Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Table 3 reveals that pre-school level, primary level and graduate studies (all independent variables) have a significant effect on the Expanding Circle's citizens' comprehension scores. The significant effect of pre-school on comprehension scores is $F(3, 198) = 4.94, p = .002$. The significant effect of primary

education on comprehension scores is $F(2, 199) = 6.93, p = .001$. The significant effect of and graduate studies on comprehension scores is $F(3, 198) = 7.46, p = .000$. However, there is no significant effect of secondary education and undergraduate studies on the subjects' comprehension scores.

The significant positive correlation of graduate studies and comprehension scores (Wilang & Teo, 2012c) and the significant effect of graduate studies on the comprehension scores (as shown in Table 3) the subjects gained in the tests strengthened the position of this study that education is vital to intelligibility and/or comprehensibility. It is no wonder that ASEAN is pursuing the region wide establishment of the Asean University Network (AUN) among universities as well as youth and cultural exchanges.

In this paper, we must be careful in interpreting the descriptive statistics results due to the limitations of this study in the following scenarios.

First, this study simply asked the subjects to indicate their educational backgrounds for establishing the effect of exposure to education against the comprehensibility levels of the Expanding Circle citizens. We have not reviewed the interrelationship between curriculum and educational standards particularly on educational programs of the Expanding circle countries. However, we can safely state that education is related to the subjects' comprehensibility based on the nonexistence of negativity on correlations (Wilang & Teo, 2012c) and/or significances (as shown in Table 3).

Second, although we have established that education and comprehensibility are related, this study cannot point out if indeed international education is the best, and/or first language instruction is far more beneficial than bilingual instruction. Also, we cannot offer evidence on the advantages and disadvantages of each of the educational programs mentioned. Due to the limitations of this study, it is hard to connect the interrelationships between and among world Englishes paradigm, language acquisition, first language instruction, bilingual education and an international education.

Third, this paper cannot identify the curricular structures used in the schools attended by the subjects in any of the educational program at each level. However, it is general knowledge that students in an international program are exposed to daily English language use whether it is the form of input or production. They are also exposed to students from various nations increasing their intercultural competence, and to varieties of accents allowing their ears to become flexible which, in turn, increases intelligibility.

Fourth, while we cannot establish the facts on how first language instruction was used in the subjects' educational backgrounds; the results of the comprehension tests favor the proponents of first language instruction.

Fifth, while it is true that international programs resulted in higher comprehension scores (see Figure 1), this research did not investigate the characteristics of any international programs and schools the subjects were enrolled in.

5. Conclusions and Implications

In the previous sections, we have reviewed the world Englishes paradigm and its application to the languages found in the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Related studies on the comprehensibility of Englishes within ASEAN were also revealed. In addition, we tried to link comprehension and the educational backgrounds of the subjects. In the end, education can be attributed to the Expanding Circle listener's understanding of the Outer Circle speaker's utterances within the context of ASEAN Englishes. Since this paper cannot directly establish the impact of ASEAN member countries' educational systems, future research can look at the following aspects: (1) impact of World Englishes on English language teaching pedagogy in an ELF setting; (2) localization of ASEAN Englishes in the tertiary level; and, (3) inclusion of world Englishes paradigm and ASEAN Englishes in the Expanding Circle's English curricula.

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Glossary

AUN: Asean University Network

ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ELF: English as Lingua Franca

NS: Native Speaker

NNS: Non-native Speaker

WE: World Englishes

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