

## **Book Review**

### **Secondary School English Education in Asia: From policy to practice**

Bernard Spolsky and Kiwan Sung (Eds.). New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015.  
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Reviewed by:

Simon Boynton

*Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong*

This is a companion volume to *Primary School English-Language Education in Asia: From Policy to Practice* (reviewed in AJAL Vol 2, No. 1) and complements well that collection of papers by covering similar issues such as the proficiency, qualifications and confidence of teachers; problems with resources and training; and the challenges of extending English language education to all. Geographically, this volume is more extensive than its primary counterpart but paints a similar picture of countries generally valuing English as a language for international communication and striving to improve citizens' proficiency. However, in some countries (e.g., Indonesia and Malaysia) English is seen as a threat to the official national language, thus generating discussions about the extent to which English should or can be officially promoted by the government.

A distinctive feature of English in secondary education is its role as a gateway to university entrance. The chapters on Bangladesh and Japan discuss the tension between university entrance exams which favour grammar tests and memorization, and contrasting curricula moves towards communicative language teaching (CLT). In some cases, CLT is considered useless by teachers and students because it does not prepare students for university entrance exams. The examination boards of Bangladesh in particular seem unwilling to align examinations with curriculum objectives. Other countries discussed in this book are moving towards assessing all four skills in alignment with the curricula.

The book shows that attempts to keep up with developments in ELT have not always been successful (e.g., adoption of a genre-based approach in Singapore and Indonesia, and a systemic functional linguistics approach in Indonesia). Nevertheless, throughout the book all authors agree that using a broadly CLT approach with secondary school students is worthwhile, but there are obstacles such as large class sizes, lack of teacher training, low English proficiency of teachers, and, perhaps most importantly, materials which do not lend themselves well to CLT.

The book also contains many interesting examples of positive developments in English language teaching. The chapter on Pakistan, for example, describes government-written textbook materials which are outdated, full of errors and do not interest students. This chapter talks extensively about the value of well-written textbooks, and how these can support and inform teachers. It goes on to show how recent textbook updates address many of the previous criticisms.

A number of the chapters discuss national English language policy, and often criticise government education bodies. The problem of low pay, which causes teachers to take on other work such as private tuition, is discussed in the chapters on Bangladesh and Vietnam. Perhaps the harshest criticism of government policy is raised in the chapter on Indonesia. In 2004, Systemic Functional Grammar and the Genre Based Approach were introduced to the curriculum, seemingly without training or guidelines for teachers, and these approaches were widely opposed by teachers. The approaches were removed from the curriculum two years later but no replacement materials were provided thus leaving a gap. The schools were given the freedom to design their own curricula but this left them in a worse position than before the changes.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book is the one on China. The authors discuss the mismatch of western textbooks that “represent the daily life of middle-class people in English-speaking Western countries,” (p.203) and the actual day to day reality of the lives of young people in China, particularly in rural areas. The authors also argue that native speaker models of English and the promotion of Western culture may not be realistic or desirable despite the huge demand for native speaker style English in China.

The strengths of this book include its extensive referencing of relevant literature throughout and the discussions of the authors’ own research in the chapters on Pakistan, Vietnam, and China. It is particularly interesting to hear the voices of the teachers (Vietnam) and students (China) and in future volumes even more examples of research including stakeholders’ views would be welcome. It would also be interesting to hear the views of parents.

Like the previous volume, this book is a must read for primary and secondary school teachers, educators of primary and secondary school teachers, and educational policymakers in Asia. Teachers in training and educators in tertiary education would also find much of value in this collection. Common challenges faced in teaching English to younger learners are clearly highlighted, and this will hopefully serve to encourage the sharing of knowledge and experience and the building of a professional community of practice in the region. This reviewer looks forward to a follow up volume on the teaching of English at tertiary level in Asia.

### **About the reviewer**

Simon Boynton is a lecturer in the Centre for Applied English Studies at the University of Hong Kong. He has taught English as a foreign language to primary and secondary school children, adults, undergraduates, and postgraduates in a number of countries including Poland, Spain, Argentina, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong and the UK. He has also been a Cambridge ESOL teacher trainer. His research interests include popular science writing, critical discourse analysis, and language teaching and learning.