

Chapter 35 English in Business Communication in Southeast Asia

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35.1 Introduction

English has become a world lingua franca in today's global village. This is especially the case for Southeast Asian (SEA) nations (namely, Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor or Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar or Burma, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam), given the linguistic diversity of this part of the world. The main languages used in this region include Burmese, Indonesian, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Mandarin, Tagalog, Thai, Vietnamese, and some Chinese dialects (e.g., Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien) as well. The region is also the home to more than 1,000 other languages (Kirkpatrick 2010). With such a large number of languages, a lingua franca is necessary for the purpose of economic growth, cultural development, and social progress within the region, especially for business communication. As it is clearly stated in Article 34 of the ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Charter signed in 2009 that 'the working language of ASEAN shall be English' (the ASEAN Charter 2009: 29), hence this lingua franca is undoubtedly English. It should be noted that although we cannot equate SEA nations to ASEAN nations, ten of the 11 SEA nations are now ASEAN members and East Timor is an observer nation of ASEAN (Kirkpatrick 2010). This sole official working language policy of ASEAN is remarkably different from the European Union (EU) as the latter has 24 official and working languages (European Commission 2013). Although English was not mentioned as the official language of ASEAN when it was founded in 1967, 'the idea of English as the common language came out automatically' and English 'has been used in all the actual situations' in ASEAN (Okudaira 1999: 95-96) well before the 2009 Charter. However, English has different roles in each of the 11 nations, which will be illustrated in detail in the next section.

In addition to the importance of English in SEA nations, it is also believed that 'Asia will be the leading economic force in the 21st century' given that 'multinational corporations headquartered in Asia have steadily taken a greater market share in the global marketplace' (Du-Babcock 2018: 4). Therefore, it is of great significance to carry out a study on English in SEA business communication as what we are doing now. The significance of this study can also be strengthened when we have a look at the large amounts of import conducted between borders of SEA nations according to WTO data in 2017 as shown in Table 35.1. The largest import between two SEA

Table 35.1 Import (US\$) conducted between SEA nations in 2017

	Brunei	Cambodia	East Timor	Indonesia	Laos	Malaysia	Myanmar	Singapore	Thailand	The Philippines	Vietnam
Brunei				2,649,179		82,173,031	140,064	11,477,737	6,775,513	2,543,203	652,442
Indonesia					14,419	246,797,481	43,474,128	7,310,952	174,132,308	3,133,011	45,094,622
Laos						1,944,734			29,985,250	48,325	10,453,546
Malaysia	199,690	1,344		430,394,280	1,581		35,111,456	72,597,076	29,697,393	20,115,992	151,030,489
Myanmar				1,668,347		22,772,814		5,588,264	25,455,453	1,919,087	128,571,712
Singapore	1,097	6,043	30,519	323,223,359	1,305	704,061,195	12,768,610		215,473,003	30,302,779	44,813,293
Thailand	86,668	286,498,427		232,447,292	134,721,692	159,015,912	86,828,310	18,116,760		17,891,714	233,882,927
The Philippines				388,817,519		86,502,588	12,375,144	30,135,266	49,700,526		140,933,632

Notes: 1. Source: <https://timeseries.wto.org/>

2. The nations in the first column are importers while those in the first row are exporters and the amounts are the sum added from animal products, dairy products, fruits, vegetables, plants, coffee, tea, and cereals and preparations.

3. The data after 2017 are unavailable for some nations (e.g., Brunei, Laos), so we adopted the 2017 data.

nations can reach to more than US\$776 million within one year. It should be noted that although no data can be found about Cambodia, East Timor, and Vietnam as importers, there were data about them as exporters.

35.2.1 English as one of the 'official' languages in four SEA nations

Strictly speaking, English is declared as one of the official languages in the Philippines and Singapore, but not in Brunei and Malaysia. However, Malaysia was previously a colony of the United Kingdom, while Brunei was a British protectorate. Hence the Philippines and Singapore can be considered as Outer Circle countries in Kachru's (1992) classification, and we can reasonably argue that English is extensively used in many aspects (if not all) in these two countries. In addition, English is extensively used in Brunei due to the introduction of the Bilingual Education System in 1985 (most subjects became English-medium from Primary 4 onwards) and *the Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21* (SPN21, 'National System of Education for the 21st century') in 2009 (English has been the medium of instruction for science and mathematics from Primary 1) (Deterding and Salbrina 2013; Mayyer Ling and He 2021; McLellan, Noor Azam Haji-Othman, and Deterding 2016; Noor Azam Haji-Othman, McLellan, and Jones 2019). It was reported that 'English has also surpassed Malay as the language regarded as most important' in Brunei and predicted that the country may even be 'monolingually English-centric' one day should the current trend continue (i.e., English becoming more and more popular among younger generation) (Salbrina 2020: 257). Salbrina and Hassan (2021: 1) also found that 'the parents are motivated to maintain Brunei Malay, but have little confidence in their abilities to pass down the home language to their children' in face of the popularity of English among the younger generation.

Although Malay is the only official language of Malaysia since its independence, the Government of Malaysia also recognized the importance of English as a global language and emphasized that 'measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught as a strong second language' (Third Malaysia Plan 1976-1980: 397). English is taught as a compulsory subject from kindergarten (four or five years old) till Form Five (about 17 years old) (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, Norsimah Mat Awal and Kesumawati Abu Bakar 2008). English is 'used as a language of communication in urban areas as well' (Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi 2013: 1). Consequently, 'Malaysia has accorded English as a second language status as stated in Article 152 and given due attention' (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, Norsimah Mat Awal and Kesumawati Abu Bakar 2008: 106). Due to the extensive use of language in Brunei and Malaysia, Wikipedia (2021) even claims that English is one the 'two official languages' in these two countries. Therefore, we can safely conclude that English is used in nearly every aspect in everyday life, business included, in these four SEA nations (namely, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia).

35.2.2 English without official language status in seven SEA nations

English has no official language status in seven SEA nations: Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar/Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam. Among these seven nations, only Myanmar was once colonized by the United Kingdom. However, its history since independence in 1948, especially the decades of closure to international society after 1962 with the military dictator U Ne Win assuming power, means that ‘the institutional role of English was lost’ (Kirkpatrick 2010: 43). On the whole, the role of English in these seven nations is quite different from the four as reviewed in Section 35.2.1, and we can argue that English has no official language status in these nations. Nevertheless, English is still playing an increasingly prominent role in these countries in various aspects like education, tourism, and international trade, ‘especially as a language of communication’ between the SEA nations (Kirkpatrick 2010: 63). Taking education as an example, as shown in Table 35.2 below, English is even introduced from Primary 1 in Myanmar and Thailand.

Table 35.2 English in education in SEA nations in 2021

Nation	Medium of Instruction (Mol)	First foreign language (Year of introduction)
Brunei	English (for most subjects) and Malay	English (Primary 1)
Cambodia	Khmer	English (Primary 3) (French also offered)
East Timor	Portuguese and Indonesian	English (Secondary 1)
Indonesia	Bahasa Indonesia	English (Secondary 1)
Laos	Lao	English (Primary 3)
Malaysia	Malay and English	English (Kindergarten)
Myanmar	Burmese	English (Primary 1)
Singapore	English	Malay/Mandarin/Tamil (Primary 1)
Thailand	Thai	English (Primary 1)
The Philippines	Filipino and English	English (Primary 1)
Vietnam	Vietnamese	English (Primary 3 in selected schools)

Source: Adapted from Kirkpatrick (2010)

35.3 English in Southeast Asian business communication

As reviewed in Section 35.2 above, English is used differently in SEA nations, that is, it is widely used in some nations like Brunei and Singapore but not so frequently used in countries like East Timor and

Laos. However, not many academic studies can be found on the use of English in business communication in this region of the world. So far, the only closely-related study has examined the challenges for Thai business people making use of English in ASEAN (Phumpho and Nomnian 2019). It was suggested that:

- ‘English proficiency is a key variable due to language differences’;
- ‘context and communicative style are the most challenging factors encouraging ASEAN English users to acquire ASEAN cultural knowledge’; and
- ‘affirmation was required to clarify intended meaning due to indirectness and subtlety when communicating with others’ (Phumpho and Nomnian 2019: 743).

However, by investigating the use of English in Southeast Asian business communication following some of the research methods influenced by Moody’s (2008) study of Macau English use, we found the following three patterns. First of all, as shown in Table 35.3, Business English courses are offered in a number of SEA universities or institutes, ever since its introduction to the world in late 1970s (Brieger 1997).

Table 35.3 Business English course offered in SEA

Nation	Universities or institutes	References
Brunei	Laksamana College of Business	(Laksamana College of Business 2021)
Cambodia	The University of Cambodia	(Foreign Language Programs 2021)
East Timor ¹		
Indonesia	President University	(Business Administration 2021)
Laos	Lao-Korean College	(Lao-Korean College 2021)
Malaysia	Universiti Malaya University Teknologi Malaysia	(Universiti Malaya 2021) (University Teknologi Malaysia 2021)
Myanmar	Yangon University Yangon University of Economics Dagon University	(Yangon University 2021) (Yangon University of Economics 2021) (Dagon University 2021)
Singapore	Amity Global Institute British Council Singapore Ten top schools or institutions for Business English	(Amity Global Institute, 2021) (British Council Singapore, 2021) (Business English Course in Singapore, 2021)
Thailand	Assumption University of Thailand Bangkok University Thammasat University	(Theodore Maria School of Arts 2021) (Bangkok University 2021) (Thammasat University 2021)
The Philippines	The world's best country in business English proficiency ²	(Mendoza 2012)
Vietnam	The University of Da Nang Foreign Trade University Some other institutions	(The University of Da Nang 2021) (Foreign Trade University 2021) (Vietnam English 2021)

Notes: 1. No information of Business English course can be found on the webpages of the top eight universities in the country (East Timor 2021) since these webpages had either no English version or only very limited information in English. This is understandable given that Portuguese and Tetum are the official languages of the country (Ramos-Horta 2012, April 20). Another main reason for the scarce literature on Business English in East Timor is that, as the newest SEA nation obtained its independence in 2002, 'scarcity of information and studies is true not only in the study of its languages but also of other spheres of its socio-culture' (Quinto 2015). However, the importance of English cannot be ignored since it is considered as one of the two working languages together with Indonesian (Quinto 2015; Ramos-Horta 2012, April 20). For example, many young East Timorese found the official language – Portuguese – very difficult and 'quit school and opt to continue with extra course such as English language training' (Quinto 2015).

2. Business English courses are so popular and successful in this country that it was once listed as the 'world's best country in business English proficiency, even beating the United States', based on a study by GlobalEnglish Corporation according to Yahoo news. There were other two SEA nations in this Top 10 list, with Malaysia at Top 6 and Singapore at Top 9.

Secondly, English-language websites are provided by a lot of SEA businesses (especially the top-level ones working across SEA nations). For example, all the Top 10 SEA companies (by market cap on September 1st, 2021) have English websites and branches (or products/services) in other countries or regions, including SEA nations (Value.Today 2021). Table 35.4 offers more details for these Top 10 companies.

Table 35.4 Top 10 SEA companies by market cap in 2021

Nation	Company names
Singapore	Sea Limited
Singapore	DBS Group Holdings
Indonesia	Bank Central Asia
Singapore	Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation
Malaysia	Malayan Banking Berhad (also known as Maybank)
Indonesia	Bank Rakyat Indonesia (Persero)
Thailand	PTT Public Company
Singapore	United Overseas Bank
Singapore	Singapore Telecommunications (Singtel)
Thailand	Airports of Thailand

Similarly, all the Top 10 SEA best managed companies in 2020 listed by investors and analysts (FinanceAsia 2021) have got English websites. All these top 10 companies have also got subsidiaries (or products) in other SEA nations – some even all over world (e.g., Petronas and City Developments Limited). Please see Table 35.5 for more details for these companies.

Table 35.5 Top 10 SEA best managed companies in 2020

Nation	Company names
Indonesia	Sido Muncul
Malaysia	PETRONAS, Sarawak Energy Sime Darby Property
The Philippines	Megawide Construction Corporation
Singapore	Mapletree Logistics Trust City Developments Limited
Thailand	CP All Thai Union Group Siam Cement Group

In addition to these 20 multinational corporations, all the Top 5 companies (except for *Tokopedia* in Indonesia) in each SEA nations have English websites. More details of these top companies can be found in Table 35.6.

Table 35.6 Top 5 companies in SEA nations

Nation	Top 5 companies ¹	Headquarters	References
Brunei	Brunei Shell Petroleum Co. Jerudong Park Medical Centre Arup Shell Deloitte	Brunei Brunei The UK Netherlands The UK	(Top Companies in Brunei 2021)
Cambodia	ABA Bank Cambodia Rosewood Hotel Group Heineken Charoen Pokphand Group World Vision International	Cambodia Hong Kong Netherlands Thailand The UK	(Top Companies in Cambodia 2021)
East Timor	Accenture Amdocs Tata Consultancy Services Cognizant Technology Solutions Capgemini	Ireland The US India The US France	(Top Companies in East Timor 2021)
Indonesia	HM Sampoerna Pertamina Tokopedia Bank Central Asia Astra International	All in Indonesia	(Top Companies in Indonesia 2021)

Laos	Google Microsoft MathWorks Facebook Apple	All in the US	(Top Companies in Laos 2021)
Malaysia	Maybank Tenaga Nasional Public Bank Berhad PETRONAS IHH Healthcare Berhad	All in Malaysia	(Dividend Magic 2021)
Myanmar	Wave Money Myanma Posts and Telecommunications United Amara Bank PTTEP PETRONAS	Myanmar Myanmar Myanmar Myanmar Malaysia	(Top Companies in Myanmar 2021)
Singapore	Sea Limited DBS Group Holdings Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation United Overseas Bank Telecommunications (Singtel)	All in Singapore	(Value.Today 2021)
Thailand	PTT Public Company Airports of Thailand Delta Electronics (Thailand) Public Company CP ALL Public Company Advanced Info Service Public Company	All in Thailand	
The Philippines	SM Investments Corporation Ayala Corporation BDO Unibank Bank of The Philippine Islands Globe Telecom	All in The Philippines	(Philippines Top Companies 2021)
Vietnam	PwC EY FPT Software ILA Vietnam VNG	The UK The UK Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam	(Top Companies in Vietnam 2021)

Note: It should be pointed out that due to different criteria adopted by different organizations, the Top Five list may be different, for example, Bank Central Asia (Top 4 in Indonesia as shown in this table) was listed as the best company in Indonesia by Value.Today (2021) as shown earlier. However, the difference of criteria is not the focus of this chapter and hence will not influence the analysis much.

Thirdly, all the top companies (except for *Tokopedia*) mentioned in this section (i.e., Section 35.3) promoted their career opportunities in English and indicated that English is required in the jobs mentioned. One reason may be that most of these companies are multinational ones.

Moreover, we can find some chapters or articles on the use of English in SEA or Asia in general. For example, Du-Babcock (2018) reviewed the relevant literature of international business and business communication in Asia (SEA included) in the past two decades. Okudaira (1999) also studied the use of English as the official language in ASEAN more than 20 years ago. Overall, the scarcity of literature on English in SEA business communication justifies the need for an empirical study of business communication in Southeast Asia.

35.4.1 Research methods

This study used a questionnaire to collect data, which was adapted from *Language use in the professional world* developed by Evans (2011, see also He 2017, 2020; He and Li 2021) to suit the context of Southeast Asia. Evans' original questionnaire includes 73 items, while the one used in this study has 77 items. It elicits data on four aspects: participants' demographic information, general pattern of language choice and use (English vs. other languages) in business communication, frequency of the use of English in business communication, and views on professional language use (both written and spoken English) in business communication. Pilot tests of the adapted questionnaire with 20 participants indicate that the internal reliability of the present questionnaire is robust (cf., George and Mallery 2003).

For the purpose of data-source cross-validation, we also interviewed 10 business professionals (5 males and 5 females) who were questionnaire participants (i.e., about 5%) from four nations. When selecting interviewees, we tried our best to take into consideration of their gender, age, size of company, and country of work. More details of the interviewees can be found in the quotations from them (see Section 35.5.5). They were asked three questions on the use and the importance of English in SEA business world. All the interviews were done via email in English.

35.4.2 Participants

The questionnaire was administered to 235 participants working in seven (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) of the 11 SEA nations with the help of 58 students (including exchange students) at a university in Brunei Darussalam. We could not administer the questionnaire to other four SEA nations because we did not know any exchange student from these four. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, we could not collect data physically or in a face-to-face manner. Therefore, in order to reach out to as many people working in business sector as possible, we had no choice but to adopt the snowball sampling to recruit participants: the student assistants were instructed to make the

questionnaire available to their parents and relatives via email. After completing the questionnaire, these target participants were further requested to approach their colleagues and friends and invite them to participate in the survey. Through this method, we were able to collect a variety of reliable data on English in SEA business communication from seven nations. A total of 235 completed questionnaires were received, and 205 responses were deemed to be valid, yielding a success rate of 87.2%.

Of the 205 participants, 97 (47.3%) were females and 108 (52.7%) males. On average, these participants had 13.6 years of English learning experience with SD as 3.5; to be specific: 2 (1.0%) learnt English five years or less, 38 (18.5%) six to ten years, 53 (25.8%) 11 to 14 years, and 112 (54.6%) 15 years or more. In terms of the highest educational level, 44 (21.5%) achieved a senior high school or equivalent, 40 (19.5%) higher diploma, 89 (43.4%) Bachelor's degree, 31 (15.1%) Master's degree, and 1 (0.5%) Doctoral degree. It can be seen that the majority of the participants were well-educated as gauged by the number of years of English learning experience ($M = 13.6$, $SD = 3.5$) and highest level of education achieved (i.e., 78.5% of the participants had got higher diploma and above). As for the age distribution, most of the participants were in their thirties, early forties or late twenties (see Table 35.7).

Table 35.7 Age distribution of the participants (N = 205)

	24 or below	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55 or above
Number	21	36	37	49	41	15	5	1
Percentage	10.2	17.6	18.0	23.9	20.0	7.3	2.4	.5

Moreover, up to 66.4 percent of the participants had worked for 15 years or less, and the survey included some experienced business professionals as well (see Table 35.8).

Table 35.8 Years of working experience of the participants (N = 205)

	≤5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	≥41
Number	23	68	45	25	24	11	7	2	0
Percentage	11.2	33.2	22.0	12.2	11.7	5.4	3.4	1.0	.0

As for the rank in their job, the participants who ticked the 'middle' rank accounted for the biggest group ($n = 82$, 40.2%), followed by 'junior' ($n = 77$, 37.5%) and 'senior' ($n = 48$, 22.3%). Most of the participants were working in small companies ($n = 175$, 85.4%), while 26 (12.7%) worked in middle-sized companies, and only four (2.0%) from large companies. Table 35.9 demonstrates the country where the participants worked. Due to the influence of COVID-19 as mentioned earlier in this section, most of the participants are from Brunei. Therefore, comparisons between the different SEA nations examined is almost not possible in this study.

Table 35.9 Participants' country of working (N = 205)

	Brunei	Indonesia	Malaysia	Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Vietnam
Number	169	8	5	6	4	10	3
Percentage	82.4	3.9	2.4	2.9	2.0	4.9	1.5

35.5 Results and findings

The questionnaire results were analyzed descriptively by means of percentages. These results were then triangulated with the interview findings.

35.5.1 Language choice in business communication

One section of the questionnaire is centered on language choice (English vs. other languages) in the participants' written business communication (reading or writing), which includes 15 items on a five-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 to 5 for the following respectively: 'Always English', 'Usually English', 'English and other languages equally', 'Usually other languages', and 'Always other languages'). A preliminary frequency analysis found that 89.8% (n = 184) of the participants always or usually used English at work for the first 13 items. However, nearly all of them (n = 201, 98.0%) used English and other languages (e.g., Malay) equally in the last two items (i.e., 'text message' and 'WhatsApp'). Given that English is not the first language for most of these participants, we can safely conclude that English is quite frequently used in their written business communication. The top five types of text the participants chose to write or read in English are: external email messages, letters, reports, minutes, and legal documents.

A detailed analysis of the 89.8% participants who used written English frequently revealed that they were from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, that is, the four nations with English as the 'official' language as reviewed earlier in Section 35.2.1. While the remaining 21 (10.7%) participants who did not use English frequently in their written business communication were from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam (i.e., the nations with English having no official language status).

Regarding spoken communication (speaking or listening), 30.3% (n = 62) of the participants most likely spoke or listened to English while doing business, 65.5% (n = 134) of them most likely code-mixed English and another language, while the other 4.4% (n = 9) most likely used other languages (i.e., not English). Similar to written communication, we can also conclude that English is quite frequently used in their spoken business communication. The top five situations in which the participants chose to speak or listen to English are: presentations, conferences, formal meetings/negotiations, job interviews, and staff training/development. Therefore, Business English module in SEA nations or other nations with similar contexts may pay more attention to improve students' abilities in these situations.

A further analysis of the participants who most likely spoke or listened to English or code-mixed English and another language in their business revealed that they were from Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, while the minority of the participants who did not use English in their business were from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

35.5.2 Use of English in business communication

Three sections of the questionnaire examine the frequency of using English for various business purposes on a six-point Likert scale ranging from '1' – 'never' to '6' – 'always' (almost every day). Table 35.10 displays such frequencies of writing, reading, speaking and listening in English respectively. It is found that 84.5% (9.8% + 18.0% + 56.7%) of the participants wrote in English sometimes (9.8%), often (18.0%), or always (56.7%), while 15.7% of them wrote some English though not very often, or seldom or never wrote in English in their business communication. The top five types of text written in English in terms of frequency are: WhatsApp messages, reports, notices, promotional materials, and minutes. When it comes to reading in English, 86.0% (10.5% + 15.7% + 59.8%) of the participants sometimes or more frequently read in English in their business, and 14.2% of them did not very often or seldom or never read in English in their business. The top five types of text the participants read in English in terms of frequency are: WhatsApp messages, notices, promotional materials, reports, and websites. Four types of text (i.e., WhatsApp messages, notices, promotional materials, and reports) are found to appear in both writing and reading top-five lists. Perhaps due to the prevalence of WhatsApp in recent years, Skype was listed as the least used written method in business communication.

With regard to the frequency of speaking or listening to English in the workplace, 90.1% (19.2% + 37.3% + 33.6%) of the participants sometimes or more frequently spoke or listened to English while doing their business, and 9.8% of them did not very often or seldom or never speak or listen to English at work. The top five speaking or listening situations are: WhatsApp messages, informal meetings/discussions, telephoning, formal meetings/negotiations, and presentations. Again, Skype was the least used.

Table 35.10 Frequency of English use in business communication (N = 205)

Mode of communication	Never	Seldom	Not very often	Sometimes	Often	Always
Writing	0.5%	5.9%	9.3%	9.8%	18.0%	56.7%
Reading	0.5%	5.4%	8.3%	10.5%	15.7%	59.8%
Speaking or listening	0.5%	3.9%	5.4%	19.2%	37.3%	33.6%

35.5.3 Importance of English in business communication

Participants were asked to rate the importance of spoken English and written English in their business on a six-point Likert scale, with '1' indicating 'completely unimportant' and '6' 'extremely important'. The results (see Table 35.11) show that 95.1% of the participants believed that spoken English was important or very important or extremely important. As for written English, 94.6% of them considered it important or very important or extremely important, while the rest of them attached little or some importance to both spoken and written English. None of the participants believed that English was completely unimportant. Further analysis revealed that the minority participants who reported English as not important were all from the three nations (i.e., Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam) where English has no official status. Overall, these percentages mean that nearly all participants attached great importance to the English language, which indicates that English is playing a significant role in the business world in SEA.

Table 35.11 Importance of languages in business communication (N = 205)

	Completely unimportant	Unimportant	Of some importance	Important	Very important	Extremely important
Spoken English	0.0%	1.5%	3.4%	6.3%	9.8%	79.0%
Written English	0.0%	1.5%	3.9%	6.3%	9.8%	78.5%

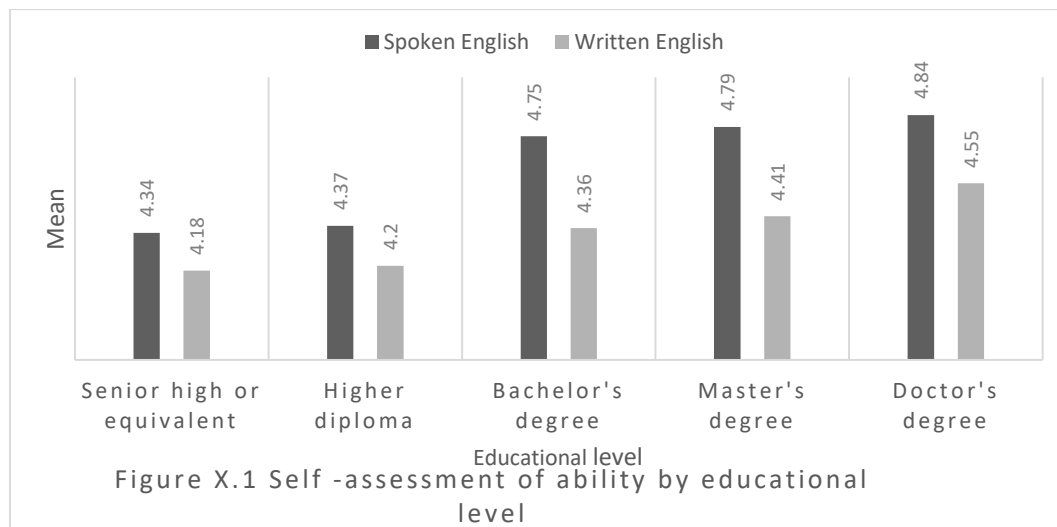
Another section of the questionnaire investigates the changes in the importance of languages used in business world. The results are shown in Table 35.12, it can be seen that 14.6 percent and 85.4 percent of the participants believed spoken English and written English had become more important or about the same respectively in their work while none of them thought that English had become less important. It is quite a coincidence that the percentages are exactly the same for both spoken and written English. When looking at the origin of the participants, we can see that most of those who reported that English had become more important in their business were from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, which is an indicator that English is gaining importance in these SEA nations where the language currently does not have an official status.

Table 35.12 Changes in the importance of languages in business communication (N = 205)

	Less important	More important	About the same
Spoken English	0.0%	14.6%	85.4%
Written English	0.0%	14.6%	85.4%

35.5.4 Self-assessment of English ability

The questionnaire investigated participants' self-assessed ability in spoken and written English on a six-point Likert scale with '1' indicating 'poor' and '6' for 'excellent'. The overall means for spoken English (4.74) and written English (4.35) demonstrate that the participants are generally confident in their English skills, 'particularly as questions of modesty are likely to have discouraged many participants from opting for the sixth point on the scale' (Evans 2011: 307). The participants' responses were then analyzed based on their highest academic level achieved (Figure 35.1).



Similar to Evans' (2011: 307) findings, the participants' 'self-perceived ability in English increases with educational level', which 'conforms to the common-sense expectation that English ability is likely to be commensurate with qualifications attained in English-medium institutions' (the case for 89.7% of the participants in the current study). However, contrary to Evans' (2011), our participants are more confident in their speaking skills than in their writing skills, which is consistent with previous findings concerning students' declining standards in English writing (Bok 2006; Javed, Wu, and Nazli 2013).

35.5.5 Interview findings

The interview consisted of three questions. They are designed to elicit the interviewees' perceptions of the use of English in their business, how important English is to their business, and whether English will become more important or not in their business. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews thus complement the questionnaire findings by enriching our understanding of the perceived significance of English in the bilingual or multilingual business world in SEA.

Question 1 asks: *Do you use English in your business? Why or why not?* To this question, all ten interviewees (100%) reported that English is used, frequently or otherwise, in their business. The reasons they listed include (arranged in decreasing order of mentions):

- English is a global language (10 mentions);
- English is a request for career opportunities (9);
- English enables us to get good education (7);
- English is the default language of many social media platforms (6);
- English is the top language of the internet (5); and
- English makes our life more entertaining (3).

Below are three examples for the use of English in the interviewees' business. The interview responses were transcribed in verbatim, and grammatical errors are left uncorrected, unless they lead to the problem of intelligibility.

- (1) Yes, English is extensively used in my business. This is mainly due to the rapid spread of globalisation, English has become an international language. Where English is not only useful for means of employment, but it is also useful for connecting with one another through social media since English is the default language of many social media platforms. With the rise of social media, it is understandable that Bruneian youths nowadays use English a lot. However, the spread of English throughout the world does not only contribute to the benefits, but also the drawbacks that cause numerous issues and concerns to arise in the perceptions of older generations towards the youths. One of the concerns is the loss of cultural and traditional knowledge of their own country that still exists. It is apparent through the declining use of the indigenous languages used in Brunei. (29-year-old male from a small size company in Brunei)
- (2) Yes, we use English a lot at our work. With the increasing use of English as means to interact with others especially internationally, people of varying ages have been given access to a wide variety of sources worldwide such as the availability of blogs, social media and the internet, for the purposes of either working or entertaining; and English is often the default language of these social media. (35-year-old female from a medium size company in Malaysia)
- (3) Yes, I use English frequently in my business. English represents the international communication tool in which exposes ourselves to the limitless and easily accessible universal knowledge and information. Without English, people may not be able to connect worldwide and they might live in isolation from the rest where advanced technology, communication and knowledge resides. (47-year-old female from a small size company in Thailand)

Question 2 asks: *Has English become more important in your business? Why or why not?* To this question, five of the 10 interviewees (50%) indicated that English had become more important in their business. The reasons include: the need to communicate more with foreigners and English is the only lingua franca; English as a required medium for work (e.g., a working language); English as a tool to access external knowledge and information; among others. This view is exemplified by three excerpts as follows:

- (4) English has become more and more important in my work. I am working in a foreign-owned company, and the working language in our company is English since some of my colleagues speak English as their first or second language. There is also a need for

us to keep up-to-date with the latest technologies through English. (33-year-old male from a small size company in Indonesia)

- (5) I think English has become more important, since I have both supervisors and colleagues who speak English and other foreign languages, and our work language is English. Besides, we have more business in foreign countries in recent years, so we must communicate with our business partners in a common or global language, that is, English. (31-year-old female from a large size company in Malaysia)
- (6) English should have become more important in my business although I have only worked for 4 years so far. As far as I can see, English is still serving as an international communication tool in spite of the negative influence from COVID-19. Even though the official language in Brunei is Malay, English is known by all sectors of the population and is actually ranked as more important than Malay in a certain area. So, English has become more important both locally and internationally. (28-year-old male from a small size company in Brunei)

Another five (50%) of the interviewees answered 'not sure' to Question 2 since they argued that the importance of English had remained more or less the same in their business.

Question 3 asks: *Will English become more or less important in your business? Why?* Nine out of the ten interviewees (90%) believed that English would become more important (see Examples 7-9 for details) whereas one of them said he did not know, and he argued that Mandarin might become more important in future, if not more important than English, than it is now (see Example 10 for details). The reasons given by these nine interviewees were listed here (in decreasing order of mentions):

- English will go on serving as the global lingua franca (8 mentions);
- English will still be the most useful language in social media and internet (7);
- English is useful for the purpose of both knowledge and entertainment (6);
- There is an increasing need for mutual communication between people of different nations given the further globalization (4); and
- At personal level, English is a must to improve the outward and upward mobility (2).

Below are examples of excerpts that demonstrate interview participants' view on whether English will become more or less important in their respective businesses:

- (7) Definitely 'more important' to me. Since we can see more and more foreigners coming to Thailand for sight-seeing and also experiencing Thai culture. We cannot expect these tourists speak Thai when they are in Thailand, so the only way we can communicate with them and serve them well is through English as it is and will go on being a global language that most tourists can understand more or less. (32-year-old female from a small size company in Thailand)
- (8) More important. Indonesia's economy is developing fast in recent years and a lot of large companies in Indonesia are thinking about opening branches abroad, including in English speaking countries and European nations, so more talents proficient in English are definitely needed, and hence the importance of English will be improved. (37-year-old male from a medium size company in Malaysia)

- (9) English will be more and more important because Brunei's young people are well-educated in English, and some of them even consider English as their first language. So we have a internal need for English. Besides, more and more movies, TV series and variety shows in English are watched all over the world, people have formed the habit of entertaining themselves via English. English is also the dominant language for many social media platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. So, I believe English will become more important. (42-year-old female from a small size company in Brunei)
- (10) Not sure. As we know, China is playing a more and more important role than ever before globally, especially in this part of the world. Besides, more Chinese enterprises are establishing business in foreign countries. For example, conspicuously, tourism in Brunei is recognised by citizens of China, which results in the demand for Chinese-speaking guides in the host country. This elucidates the fact that Mandarin might be considered a universal language instead of English in future. (29-year-old male from a small size company in Brunei)

35.6 Discussion and conclusions

Just like the educational language policy in Macau is seeking to maintain the balance among Chinese, English and Portuguese (Moody 2019), business in SEA is also done by using different languages like a major local language, English, and sometimes even Mandarin due to increasing regional influence of China. The results and findings reported in the current study seem to suggest that English is even more frequently used than most local languages (e.g., Malay in Brunei) in Southeast Asian nations. This is understandable since English is considered as the only working language for the regional organization, ASEAN. In addition, as reviewed in Section 35.2.1, English is one of the official languages in the Philippines and Singapore and has an 'official language' influence in Brunei and Malaysia due to these nations' historical ties with the United Kingdom. In other words, English has its sociolinguistic basis for being widely used in these four SEA nations. Last but not least, with the increasing globalization, English is naturally used more and more in the world as the most widely used international language (He 2018; Kirkpatrick 2021), especially when it comes to the use of English in business and other fields like popular culture (Moody 2021), and SEA is not an exception.

The widespread of English in SEA, business world included, even results in some local varieties of English, for example, Brunei English (see Deterding and Salbrina 2013; Ho and Deterding 2016; Ishamina Athirah and Deterding 2015), Singapore English (see Deterding 2007), and Malaysia English (see Yamaguchi and Deterding 2016). The acceptance of these new varieties of English will in turn make English users (including business English users) in these nations more confident in their English use and therefore use English more in various aspects in their life (e.g., business), since some apparent deviations from lexico-grammatical norms of standardized Englishes will no longer be indiscriminately dismissed as errors (Li and He 2021).

However, the extensive use of English in SEA is not without its own problem. For instance, there is concern that the overuse of English may be detrimental to the local languages and cultures in SEA (e.g., Malay in Brunei, see Example 1 in Section 35.5.5 for details). It is believed that both English and Malay (both Standard Malay and Brunei Malay) are important in Brunei just like what Özóg (1996: 159) said, ‘for Bruneians, English is the language of knowledge, but Malay is the language of the soul’. Thus, when we practice English widely in business world in SEA, we should also try not to forget indigenous languages and culture, or else, the cost may be the endangerment or even the extinction of the local languages (Noor Azam Haji-Othman 2012, 2017).

Like other empirical studies of a similar nature, this chapter suffers from one limitation in our data collection method. Although we have tried our best to include participants from different countries in SEA, and despite the snowballing nature of our data-collection method adopted against the current COVID-19 situation, our participants cannot be said to be a representative cross-section of a well-defined sample with regard to English-using populations in SEA business world. It is our wish that such a shortcoming could be overcome in future research by collecting business English data from frontline business English users across all SEA nations more or less evenly.

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