

## **Neoliberalism and Its Impact on English as a Medium of Instruction in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In today's modern world economy, there is always a competition among countries as a consequence of globalization. A salient feature of globalization is the adoption of neoliberalism – a modern contemporary economic ideology. Neoliberalism ideology is spreading fast around the globe including in South East Asia. The spread and adoption of English as the main medium of communication in conducting business, trade, commerce and various fields is the direct and indirect results of the impact of neoliberalism. This ideology has brought about many changes economically, socially and educationally to these countries. This paper intends to investigate the impact of neoliberalism especially on English as a medium of instruction in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. It will focus on the implementation of CEFR which is also directly related to the adoption of neoliberalism.*

**Keywords:** CEFR; Developing countries; Education system; Globalization; Neoliberalism

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of neoliberalism ideology in the '80s has not only affected the world economy but also influenced many aspects of lives of people including education. The transformation of education systems in many countries these days is the direct and indirect results of the adoption of neoliberalism cum globalization. Neoliberalism which is constantly associated with globalization, is even considered as one element of globalization (Chang, 2015). Fairclough (1995) and Blommaert (2010) viewed neoliberalism as an ideology normally associated with globalization and it could be used interchangeably because neoliberalism is part of globalization. Neoliberalism is actually an economic ideology which emphasizes on the role of unregulated

market, free trade, foreign investment, reduced public expenditures, privatization and deregulation combined with minimal government intervention in business (Campbell, 2009; Haque, 2008; Kandiko, 2010; Majhanovich, 2014).

It also means that the international market competition is high since the basic elements for national competition within the international market place are economics and productivity of knowledge as well as economic individualism based on market competition (Campbell, 2010 & Haque, 2008). Consequently, both globalization and neoliberalism have shaped the modern society and have affected the people in various ways. Some of the obvious affects are the rise in the number of participation in the global market including in developing countries, competitive economic competition among those countries, the need to upgrade the skills and knowledge level of country's human capital and lastly the use of English as the main medium of communication (Piller & Cho, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Neoliberalism has also introduced the idea of knowledge society which emphasizes the importance of knowledge among people of countries as well as the use of English for many of the new service industries, for instance business process and information outsourcing (Block, Gray & Halborow, 2012). The concept of neoliberalism in applied linguistics is the result of English as a dominant language which is seen to be intersecting with neoliberalism as well as globalization. Neoliberalism in applied linguistics highlights the role of English in a globalized economy. After the emergence of neoliberalism in 1980s the world has witnessed the global spread of English especially in the economy sector. Consequently, English is now regarded as the language of work and economy. It plays a vital role in corporate driven globalization. This phenomenon has forced the world especially the non- English speaking countries to strengthen the language in order to participate and compete globally because English holds the key to global competitiveness. For this reason, knowledge of English is highly valued as a social and human capital.

Since then, many non-speaking English countries such as China, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and many more have adopted English as a language of communication to participate and compete in the globalized economy. This confirms the important role of English as a tool of neoliberalism and globalization specifically in Asian contexts (Majhanovich, 2013). In order to compete globally, human capitals with strong command of English are needed by these developing countries to compete internationally. Drastically, these countries have included English as a compulsory subject in schools up to tertiary levels to meet the demands. A few global educational policies from the western countries are also adopted as government initiatives to improve and produce skilled labors with excellent communication in English. Some of the global policies borrowed are the Outcome Based-Education (OBE), the New Public Management model (NPM) and school-based assessment (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006; Mok, 2010; Tam, 2009). Hence, this paper is interested to find out to what extent has neoliberalism influenced and changed the educational policies of the countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam.

### **Neoliberalism and Its Impact on the Medium of Instruction**

Science and technology are two salient elements of neoliberalism and globalization. Thus,

subjects such as mathematics, science and technology are made compulsory subjects to be taught in schools. As a result, science has been made a core subject in both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia since 1996. Later in January 2003, the Ministry of Education Malaysia took a bold step by enacting a new policy of re-adopting English as a medium of instruction in the teaching of science and mathematics subjects. The justification was to help improve English proficiency level of Malaysians and keep abreast with the latest scientific technology (Mohamad Fadhili et.al, 2009; Zahara, Shurainee & Rozalina, 2011). Nevertheless, Ministry of Education Malaysia found that students did poorly in science and mathematics which caused students' grades for both subjects to drop. This ended the teaching of science and mathematics in English in 2011 and the medium of instruction for science and mathematics was reverted to Bahasa Malaysia with the introduction of a new policy known as Upholding the Malay Language and strengthening the English Language Policy or "Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Mengukuhkan Penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI) which started in 2012 and continues until today (Gooch, 2009; Tharmalingam, 2012).

Identically, the teaching of both mathematics and science subject starts from primary education grade 1 to 3 all the way to the tertiary level in Vietnam (World Bank, 2005). Again mathematics and science are the most preferred programs by the Vietnamese alongside business, economics and law. These programs are the public's preferred choice since it promises to make the students more competitive and highly demanded in the labour market (Bui, 2014). While in Thailand, a special task force known as the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (IPST) has been set up since 1970 to continually develop Thai science curriculum (Pruekpramool, Phonphok, White & Musikul, 2013). Moreover, to strengthen the knowledge of the Thai people with the latest advancement of science and technology at early stage, the government has also introduced and implement STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education to be taught in schools (Senajuk, Sakorn, Sriwapee & Trisupakitti, 2016).

Another way to ensure the quality and standard of education is at par with the international standard, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand have participated in several international assessments as a measurement tool, for instance programs such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), International Large- Scale Assessments (ILSA), Program for the Analysis of Education Systems (PASEC) (Chan, 2012; Kang, 2013; Le 2014). Not only participating in international assessment is believed to elevate the quality and standard of education in these countries, the Eurocentric influence on education continues with the adoption of Western pedagogical models as well as the policies. Among the first western policy adopted as early as 1990 in Thailand was the Education For All (EFA) policy (Chan, 2012). Then, Thailand started off with enacting learner-centred approach to be used in schools in the 1999 National Education Act. Later, Thailand Ministry of Education expanded the borrowing of western pedagogical models with the implementation of task-based learning, self-access learning and e-learning (Darasawang, 2007). Student-centred approach, privatization of higher education and communicative approach are some of the western pedagogical models and policies adopted by Vietnam (Ellis, 1994; Thanh & Renshaw, 2013). Malaysia on the other hand has borrowed several policies which are different from

Thailand, for examples the Outcome Based-Education (OBE), the New Public Management model (NPM) and school-based assessment (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006; Mok, 2010; Tam, 2009).

The most significant influence and impact neoliberalism has on education is the spread of English because it is important and needed in today's globalized, modernized and liberal era. As mentioned previously, highly-skilled and knowledgeable workers are required for a country to compete at international level. One of the requirements is the ability to communicate well in English, both in spoken and written forms. Hence, exposing and teaching of English in the non-speaking English country should start at an early stage. For this reason, the best platform to start is through the teaching of English formally in schools. Due to this, many countries around the world including the developing countries in Asia have made English a core or compulsory subject to be taught in formal education. Thailand did not make English a compulsory subject in school but Mathematics, Science and Physical are a few of the subjects which could be conducted in English at primary level. Whereas at secondary level, all subjects could be taught using English except Thai and Social Sciences as an effort to provide more exposure to the learners. English is not compulsory but foreign language learning is required for the secondary level. Despite other languages offered, most Thai students choose to learn English because it is a required subject in the National University Entrance Examination. Nevertheless, English is made compulsory for university students in which 12 credits or 4 English courses are the requirement for undergraduates to complete their degree (Darasawang, 2007).

English has received special attention and once it was declared as a second language in 1970 when the National Language policy was implemented in Malaysia during post – independence (Saadiyah Darus, 2013). A total of 240 minutes and 210 minutes per week were stipulated to the teaching of English at primary level for National primary schools. As for Chinese and Tamil national type schools, 60 minutes per week was allocated for Primary 3 and 90 minutes per week for Primary 4 to 6. Furthermore, videos, worksheets, games and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs were some of the innovations used in enhancing the teaching of English as well as to entice students' interests in learning this language. Then in March 2000, a literature component was introduced as part of the English subject from Form 1 to Form 4. Three years later, a Malay-English mixed-medium education was then implemented in National schools around Malaysia. This includes enacting English as a compulsory second language taught in schools beginning at Primary One. To further emphasize the importance of English, the policy of teaching Science and Mathematics in English was introduced and in 2008 national examinations for Primary 6, Form 3 and Form 5 would be in English (Saadiyah Darus, 2010). Unfortunately, the government plans to make it compulsory for students to pass English in one of Malaysia Major National Examination is postponed because both students and teachers were not ready (Haikal Jalil, 2016).

In Vietnam, English was first introduced and taught during the French times but it was not as important as learning French. Nonetheless, English has become a very important foreign language after the overall economic reforms during the 90s Asian financial crisis. Officially in 1986, English became the first and almost the only foreign to be taught in formal education. English then was one of elective subjects at primary level but compulsory subject for secondary

level. Adding to that, English subject is one of the six compulsory subjects to be taken by students and must pass the national examination in order to obtain a certificate of secondary school education. Seeing the importance of English to Vietnam economic growth, English has been made a core and compulsory subject to both undergraduate and post-graduate students. The Ministry of Education and Training also took the extra mile by designing and writing new English textbooks. Recently, the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) is used as a standardized international assessment tool to measure the quality and standard of English teaching and learning in Vietnam (Hoang, 2010).

### **CEFR as the Tool for Aligning English Language Education**

English has been used and taught thought in formal education for years in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. Despite all the efforts put forth by the governments to improve English proficiency levels of Malaysians, Thais and Vietnamese, the standard is still poor and these countries have yet to produce highly-skilled graduates who have strong command of the language (Ministry of Education, 2013; Tien, 2013). Moreover, the standard and quality of English in these countries are low when compared to the international standard. Therefore, a new international standard assessment tool popularly known as CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) has been comprehensively adopted by many countries including Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. The main aim of CEFR is to establish international standards for foreign language education to cater to the needs of language learners as well as academics and other professions related to assessment, teaching and learning of languages. Apart from being created and used as a guideline, the Council of Europe (2001) argued that CEFR is needed at all levels of language learning since it promotes and facilitates co-operation among educational institutions in different countries. The framework has six levels of “can do” descriptors which are used to categorize learners’ ability to use a language .Language users are clustered into three main groups- 1) Proficient users- levels C1 & C2, 2) Independent users- levels B1 & B2 and 3) Basic users - levels A1 & A2. Detailed descriptors of what learners are able to do are also known as the “can do” statements for listening, writing, readings and speaking skills.

Commonly, CEFR is only adopted and aligned adopt and align against English syllabus and assessments as adaptation of this framework into local context requires more time and extensive research. Therefore, the new English syllabus, curricula and assessments in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam are constructed based on six levels of CEFR descriptors. For instance, Ministry of Education Malaysia has planned to revamp a national university entrance test known as Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The new MUET will then be developed based on CEFR so that MUET will be internationally recognized. Hence, students could use MUET results for application to study abroad instead of using IELTS. Consequently, the new CEFR-aligned MUET will no longer use six bands scale as it will be replaced with CEFR six levels of descriptors. Thus, MUET result will appear as CEFR level “B1” and not Band 4 on the result slip. Table 1 shows the comparison between the current six band scales and six levels of CEFR descriptors. Band 6 is the highest scale of MUET band is equivalent to CEFR level C2.

**Table 1**  
 Comparison of the MUET scales

MUET	CEFR aligned MUET
Band 6	C2
Band 5	C1
Band 4	B2
Band 3	B1
Band 2	A2
Band 1	A1

Vietnam is the first country in South East Asia to adopt CEFR when it was launched in 2008. Then in 2014 after years of preparing and finalizing the national framework of foreign language, Vietnam first ever six-level framework for foreign language proficiency was launched. The original framework was modified to suit local contexts and to reduce Eurocentric elements of it. This framework is utilized to assess the standard and quality of English learning as well as to motivate educational institutions to actively develop and carry out bilingual programmes (Hoang, 2010).

**Table 2**  
 Vietnam six level foreign language proficiency framework

Education Level	CEFR - V	CEFR
Primary	Level 1	A1
Lower secondary & vocational colleges	Level 2	A2
Upper secondary & university graduates	Level 3	B1
Language colleges	Level 4	B2
	Level 5	C1
High school teachers	Level 6	C2

Table 2 illustrates Vietnam's new curriculum of English language learning which stipulated the target level students should obtain based on six-levels of CEFR-V. The six levels of CEFR-V is equivalent to six levels of CEFR. First, students who complete primary education should reach Level 1 while the target for lower secondary students is level 2. Second, upper secondary or school leavers in general should obtain level 3. As for tertiary education, the target level varies, for instance, vocational colleges graduates should reach level 2 and level 3 for university graduates in general. Whereas graduates from language colleges ought to reach between level 4 to 5 since English is a compulsory subject for them and level 6 as the highest level is dedicated from high school teachers. Currently, German-authored textbooks are used because teaching and learning materials which are aligned to CEFR are needed (Nguyen & Hamid, 2015; Tien, 2013). Unfortunately, this framework received negative response and a study by Nguyen & Hamid (2015) found that a large number of teachers were not motivated and not interested to engage affectively with the six levels of CEFR can-do descriptors in their classroom activities. Students were also not familiar and not provided with learner empowerment tools such as self-assess toolkit (North, 2011).

Despite the negative responses and a flop with Vietnam’s national foreign language project, Vietnam has shown significant improvement in PISA 2015 particularly for reading literacy. Vietnam did not participate in 2009 with (M: m, SD: m) as their first participation started in 2012 with (M: 508, SD: .74). Vietnam however, scored better results in 2015 PISA with (M: 487, SD: .73) when the Vietnamese outranked United Kingdom, United States and Australia. As a result, Vietnam was rank 19 out of 65 countries for reading literacy (Mohd Niaz & Perera, 2015). CEFR which was officially implemented in 2014 would most probably be the reason for Vietnam sharp increase in their performance particularly for reading literacy for 2015 PISA with the average of 332 (refer table 3).

**Table 3**  
 PISA results 2015 for reading literacies

		2009		2012		2015		2009-2015
Rank	Countries	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	Average
19	Vietnam	m	m	508	74	487	73	332
57	Thailand	421	72	441	78	409	80	424
58	Malaysia	414	81	398	84	431	81	414

\*Note: m: did not participate, M: mean score, SD: standard deviation, Rank: rank for reading literacies only out of 65 participating countries in 2015.

Thailand has also illustrated the desire for standardization of English among its people through CEFR adoption since Thailand did poorly for 2009, 2012 and 2015 PISA for reading literacy as their scores for three years were below OECD line. Table 2 shows Thailand’s rank and results for PISA 2015 reading literacy. Unlike Vietnam, Thailand has participated since 2000 and their performance has fluctuated over the years. In 2009, PISA results for Thailand is (M: 421, SD: 72) and their performance rose in 2012 with (M: 441, SD: 78). In contrast, Thailand performance in reading literary dropped sharply in 2015 with (M: 409, SD: 80). The average score of Thailand for three years is 424 and was ranked 57 out of 65 countries. Urgently the Thai government has decided to align its teaching of English language with CEFR starting May 2015 (Maxwell, 2015). CEFR-T was proposed to be designed by a professional quality institute and also to prepare a single multipurpose test for schools students, university and foreign teachers as well as professionals. The Thai Ministry of Education has set English proficiency targets for Thai students based on six levels of CEFR descriptors. Accordingly, by the end of Prathom 6 (grade 6) students should have reached CEFR level A1 proficiency. Next, by the end of Mathayom 3 (grade 9) students are required to reach CEFR level A2 and lastly by the end of Mathayom 6 (grade 12) students should have reached B1 level. Nonetheless, a major change on language learning in Thailand is needed in order to match their English language curricula with the framework which emphasizes on communicative language ability. This includes developing new tools to measure students’ language abilities since the current multiple choice papers only assess grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. In line with this adoption, Thai government has also decided to elevate teachers’ skills in language teaching according to CEFR framework and Communicative Language Teaching. Perhaps, the adoption of CEFR in Thailand is the first big step for them to continuously improve English language standards among the Thai people.

The effectiveness of CEFR adoption in Thailand can only be measured based on the next PISA which is scheduled to take place in 2018.

Malaysia's first participation in PISA was in 2009 with (M: 414, SD: 81) then it dropped significantly in 2012 with (M: 398, SD: 84). Nevertheless, the performance of 15-year-old Malaysians rose up in 2015 with (M: 431, SD: 81). This ranked Malaysia at 58 right under Thailand out of 65 participating countries with 414 average points. However, Malaysia still did poorly in PISA as the scores were below OECD line. News report and complaint on the low level of English proficiency among graduates and the decline in the standard of English among young Malaysian made by Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) are undeniable with poor PISA reading literacy results. Hence, the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQ) decided to take a drastic move which involved total structural changes with the aim to raise the standard of English in Malaysia through the implementation of CEFR. The implementation of CEFR in Malaysia is scheduled to take place in three waves starting from 2013 to 2025. The implementation of CEFR into English language curricula involves learners at all levels: preschool, primary, secondary, post-secondary, university and teacher education. Wave 1 (2013 – 2015) focuses on strengthening the current education system and curricula including to address low proficiency among English teachers by setting a minimum proficiency requirement for English teachers. Details of CEFR level set for each educational stage are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
CEFR targets for each stage of education

Education stage	CEFR level
Pre- school	A1
Primary school	A2
Secondary school	B1/ B2
Post – secondary school	B2
University	B2/C1
Teacher Education	C1

Source: English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025

CEFR level B2 is set for primary school teachers while those teaching at secondary schools are required to reach the minimum of CEFR level C1. Wave 2 (2016- 2020) are divided into two phases; phase 1 (2015-2016) and phase 2 (2017- 2020). The main agenda of wave 2 is to introduce the structural change. These changes cover CEFR-aligned curricula, teaching and learning as well as assessment. Next, suitable CEFR descriptors would be developed for each educational levels based on the Cambridge Baseline 2013. The developed CEFR descriptors will then be validated in phase 2. The process of aligning English syllabus and curricula as well as School Based Assessment (SBA) to the CEFR is done at this stage too. International CEFR-aligned textbooks and support materials are also selected to be used at the implementation stage. Phase 2 commences from 2017 to 2020.

After four years of implementation, the outcomes of CEFR- aligned English language curricula will be evaluated and revised in wave 3 starting from 2021 to 2025. Wave 3 is devoted



to the process of evaluating, reviewing and revising steps taken in both waves 1 and 2. The developed CEFR descriptors will also be reviewed and revised. Results from the review and revised process will help the special CEFR task force to develop the so called CEFR-M. Selected textbooks and support materials will also be evaluated and revised. The ELSQC will be evaluating teachers' use of teaching and learning process as well as assessment practice at this point. At the end of each educational stages, students should be able to use and demonstrate the language according to the required CEFR level. In short, the complete process of aligning and implementing CEFR into English language curricula in Malaysia takes about 12 years. The implementation of CEFR is currently at wave 2 which only so far involve students in year 1 and form 1. Therefore, the success and effectiveness of the framework cannot be measured yet.

In brief, after four years of CEFR implementation in Vietnam, the Vietnamese government is currently improving it based on several drawbacks. The improvement plan includes developing their own CEFR based textbooks, stop the current use of imported German CEFR based textbooks and coming up with an extensive version of CEFR – V (Nguyen, 2017). The situation is different in Malaysia and Thailand since the implementation of CEFR in both countries is still at initial stage. Therefore, the effectiveness of CEFR in improving English proficiency of Malaysians and Thai people cannot be measured yet. Nevertheless, Thailand and Malaysia could have a better implementation of CEFR by avoiding the same mistakes made by Vietnam.

## **CONCLUSION**

All in all, the concept of neoliberalism or sometimes known as globalization has been embraced by countries in South East Asia particularly in Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. The opening up of the country's economy due to direct and indirect impact of neoliberalism has not only changed the economic trends but also affected other aspects including social, cultural and most significantly education. Consequently, these countries have decided to make English as a compulsory subject not only in schools but also up to the tertiary levels to meet the demands from the market. To ensure that the students meet the needs, a new international standard assessment tool or CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which was originally meant for EU, has been comprehensively adopted by these countries. One way to do it is by adopting CEFR onto the education system of Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. Hence, these countries curriculums and syllabuses have been realigned to meet the requirements of the new framework. It is strongly believed that the adoption of CEFR onto education system would help to improve English proficiency of non – English speaking countries since there is connection between human capitals with strong command of English and country's economy. Human capitals with strong command of English are needed by these developing countries to compete internationally. It is clear that the human capital is the link between the country's economic status and education system. The education systems in these developing countries continue to experience extensive restructuring process, reforms and keep on evolving to meet the demands of the international community. Education serves as a platform to produce a knowledge society that includes having excellent communication skills in English.

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