

## Chapter 1.5

### English Language Education in Thailand

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Thailand is a country that has its own language, both spoken and written, but is also part of the “expanding circle” countries in which English is used for intercultural communication (Kachru 1985). Even though it has several regional dialects, the official language and language of everyday life is Central or Standard Thai. With the purpose of modernizing the country in order to maintain its independence from outside powers, English was introduced into Thai education in the seventeenth century. Since then, it has developed in schools and has been taught both as a subject and a foreign language. It is a required subject in the entrance examination at different educational levels from primary (in some cases) to tertiary levels. English has, thus, a significant role in Thai education and all students study it, be it a compulsory or an elective subject, and they spend a lot of time studying it. Many started learning English in school in grade 1 continuing up to grade 12 and further to the tertiary level. Apart from studying English at school formally, many students attend English classes at a tutorial or language school.

Considering the amount of time Thai students have spent studying English, a high level of English proficiency should be expected of them. Unfortunately, in reality Thai students' English proficiency was below average as shown in the English scores on the 2012 Thailand's Ordinary National Education Tests (O-NET) of primary, lower, and higher secondary students which were 38.4 percent, 30.5 percent, and 21.8 percent respectively. The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), a report that attempts to rank countries by the average level of English skills, shows that in its 2013 rankings, Thailand was ranked 55 out of 60 countries worldwide with a score of 44.4 percent and was categorized in the “Very Low Proficiency” level. Also, in the same year, Thai students were reported to have tested lowest in ASEAN on the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), with scores averaging 450.

These results came after the Thai government had endorsed many projects to strengthen English language education in the country including, to name but a few, projects entitled “Development of English Skills and Improving Teaching and Learning Efficiency of the Teachers” (2003), “Teaching and Learning English Reform for Strengthening the Capacity of National Competitiveness” (2006–2010), and the “English Speaking Year” policy (2012).

English language education in Thailand does gain support from the Thai government, and has always been a great concern of educators, policy makers, and every potential party. This is especially so at the present time when Thailand is committing itself to liberalization in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), where one of the most important ways to reap benefits is for Thai people to

overcome the English language barrier. Therefore it is urgent to look into this issue and decide how to improve the English proficiency of Thai students.

Whenever there is a finding or a statement about the failure of English teaching and learning three factors are blamed and reforms recommended: the curriculum, teachers, and students. These all need to be looked at closely to determine the real cause of the failure and effective solutions.

English curricula in Thailand have been developed continuously since English language teaching was introduced into Thai education. In 1891, when English was first added to the curriculum, it focused on reading, writing, and translation with the aim of enabling Thai officials to deal with foreign traders and diplomats without the need for a translator (Darasawang 2007). In 1932, English syllabus focused on reading aloud with correct pronunciation and comprehension of the text emphasizing grammar and translation as well. Later, the grammar-translation method was replaced by the aural-oral method as English language teaching aimed at the use of English.

In 1960, all students beyond grade 4 were required to study English. The objectives of this curriculum were for students to use English for international communication and knowledge acquisition. Four language skills were emphasized equally in the teaching, which was criticized as teacher-centered.

Nearly twenty years later, the 1977 curriculum was launched aiming to correct every weak point of the previous curriculum. English was taught at grade 5, with an exception of schools with qualified teachers to teach at grade 1. The belief was that children should learn a second language after mastering their mother tongue.

Students starting to learn English at different levels made it difficult to manage the classroom at the secondary level and many recommendations pointed out that children should start learning English as early as possible. Thus, in the 1996 curriculum, English was made compulsory for all primary school students from grade 1 onwards. English language proficiency was encouraged to fulfill the purposes of communication, academic studies, career advancement, and cultural understanding.

In the subsequent National Education Curriculum implemented in 2002, there was a shift from teaching English as an academic subject of study to English as a medium of communication. Moreover, the English language had an increasingly important role since it was announced to be the only official language of the ASEAN. In 2005, schools were encouraged to establish bilingual programs where the core subjects were taught in English and to offer intensive English language programs as well.

In the 2008 curriculum, which is still in effect now, English is taught as one of the foreign language subjects. The curriculum links English with communication, culture, other subject area content, and to community context. Teaching focuses on students and communication, using a communicative approach with more focus on listening and speaking (Wiriyachitra 2002). In this curriculum only descriptions of strand, content, and performance standards and benchmarks for each level are specified. Teachers have to write their course materials with content related to their community context. This led the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2013 to revise the whole system of English instruction to aim for equality and quality in English education.

From the summary of curricular changes in Thailand presented above about the curricular, it is apparent that each new curriculum was designed to serve the needs of the country at that particular time. In an attempt to improve the standard and facilitate learning, the curriculum is frequently changed, causing confusion and uncertainty amongst practitioners. Despite the good intentions of each curriculum to develop the English proficiency of the students, many times there is inconsistency between policy and practice from many factors such as lack of clear and detailed guidelines in implementing the curriculum, the difficulties in applying new teaching methods, the lack of teachers' understanding of the underlying theories and principles, and the problems in transferring learning achievement due to weak relationships between the teaching and the exam-based assessment (Cheewakaroon 2011). Therefore, every time the curriculum needs changing, every factor concerned has to be considered.

Teachers also face much criticism as a major cause of the failure of English education in Thailand and always are the subject of any educational reform. Teachers in Thailand are working hard and have a lot of responsibilities. Yet we do have to accept the fact that in many ways teachers of English contribute to the success and failure of the English education. The first way is through the presence of so many unqualified teachers due to their insufficient English language skills and native speaker cultural knowledge. Based on a 2009 MOE report, 31.7 percent of the teachers had basic English proficiency, 64.4 percent had intermediate proficiency, and only 3.9 percent had advanced proficiency. In 2006 a survey to launch a new course and qualifications for non-native speaker English teachers, the University of Cambridge reported that the knowledge of the language and teaching methodology of 60 percent of Thai teachers was below that of the syllabus level they were teaching. Of the remaining 40 percent only 3 percent had a reasonable level of fluency and only 20 percent were teaching students at the grades in which they qualified. In addition, according to Noopong (2002), 65 percent of primary school teachers who taught English were not English majors and many of them admit that they are forced to teach English although they have little or no knowledge of the language. Prospects of a teaching career in Thailand cannot persuade English major graduates to work in schools. Most of them prefer to work in other higher salary jobs like flight attendants, hotel staff, and private company officers (Dhanasobhon 2006).

Besides, Thai teachers have heavy teaching loads. Most of them teach at least 18 hours a week on average and are assigned to help with other duties in the school plus teach additional classes outside regular school hours to supplement their meager salary. Moreover, at school they teach classes of about 45-60 students, which is considered too large for a language class. Each teacher has the responsibility for too many students. The ratio of teacher to students at the primary and secondary levels is approximately 1:62 and 1:166 respectively. An overloaded burden and their low English proficiency cause their teaching styles to fossilize into teaching methods that focus too much on grammar (accuracy) or on communication (fluency), rote-learning, using the Thai language as a medium of instruction, teacher-centeredness, and exam-based exercises. The problem of inadequate English proficiency of the teachers is well recognized and the Government has allocated a large budget to support in-service training for them. Everyone accepts that the most important factor in student learning progress is the teacher, and

teacher quality outweighs other factors. Qualified teachers can create the best environment for learning. However, many training projects do not achieve their objectives of developing English proficiency and effective teaching methods of the teachers as they are conducted in a top-down and non-collaborative manner. Teachers have no opportunity to voice their needs regarding the professional development activities claimed to support them.

Considering students, the third factor effecting low English proficiency in Thailand, since English has always been considered a foreign language, students do not really realize its potential importance especially in their daily lives. In other words, they have very low motivation to learn English. They know they need English for the entrance examination to higher levels of education, but they will focus mainly on form and accuracy. So they learn English for the examination, not for communication.

Another cause of the students' low motivation is reflected in the materials and textbooks used which are mostly irrelevant to their lives and sometimes too difficult. Thai students are also seen to lack interest in communicating in English. This may be because of the influence of the seniority system practiced traditionally in Thailand and also their shyness. Thai students tend to be norm-oriented. Thus, they do not want to take risks in learning a new language that will take them away from their cultural norms. However, if they do have the intention to communicate in English, they do not have many opportunities to use English outside the classroom. As previously noted, Thai people use their first language officially and daily, so there is little need for students to use English out of class. Moreover, in class there is insufficient time and exposure to the language. Grades 1-3 students study English for only one hour a week; grades 4-6 two hours a week; grades 7-9 three hours a week; and grades 10-12 two hours a week plus extra hours of electives depending on their stream of study (Art or Science). At the undergraduate level, freshman and sophomore students who are not English majors or minors are required to study English for only 3-6 hours a week, and English is optional in their third and fourth years. These limited hours of English instruction make it hard for students to develop competency in English, and for teachers to attain their goals to enable students to communicate in various situations, and to use English to find information, attain employment, and further their education.

In addition, many teachers still use a grammar-translation approach despite the curriculum requirement for a communicative approach. This results in students focusing on language accuracy and being reluctant to use English to communicate for fear of making mistakes.

Putting these three factors together, it is all but inevitable that the English proficiency of Thai students has been unsatisfactorily low. Nevertheless, the world is changing, providing both challenges and opportunities for the teaching and learning of English in Thailand, and the English Teaching community in Thailand is responding. Integrating into the ASEAN community has increased the awareness of English language as a language for work and for communication. Every party concerned has participated in developing English language education in Thailand. The government has allocated a large budget to the MOE to improve their work to provide better education for the people. English education has particularly been given close attention.

In 2003, the MOE set up its strategic plans to support English teaching and learning. The most important plan was to get qualified teachers as they are significant in determining the success or failure of the teaching and learning. The MOE has plans to develop both teachers who have a background education in English and those who have graduated in other subject areas. Teachers are provided opportunities to develop professionally. The Common European Framework (CEFR) is implemented to evaluate English proficiency of the teachers and the students as well. The ideas of coaching, mentoring, and participating in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) are introduced to the teachers. Professional organizations and resources such as the British Council, US State Department Regional English Language Office, and Thai TESOL are playing a more active role to empower the teachers.

Using Information and Communication Technology is emphasized in teaching as well to help move the approach away from teaching grammar towards teaching language for communicative purposes using task-based, project-based and problem-based approaches, integrated skills, and collaborative learning. It is believed that technology will make the learning of English more enjoyable for the students, and will thus increase their motivation. Students will enjoy interacting with one another and with teachers through social networking. Technology will certainly offer more collaboration.

In conclusion, although the reports regarding the low English proficiency in Thailand have shocked everyone as we were certain we had been working hard to improve proficiency, the problems of the English teaching in Thailand are not impossible to solve. As English educators we need to support our students to be able to live productively in a world of conflict, huge competition, and an overwhelming overload of information. They have to learn to accept cultural pluralism, to develop independent and critical thinking, flexibility, and the ability to explore and readjust. To achieve in English language learning is thus not just to develop language skills, but life skills.

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