



ISSN: 0976-3376

Available Online at <http://www.journalajst.com>

ASIAN JOURNAL OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Asian Journal of Science and Technology
Vol. 09, Issue, 02, pp.7643-7648, February, 2018

RESEARCH ARTICLE

TRANSFORMATION FROM NEEDS TO GOALS: STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF THAI UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 25th November, 2017
Received in revised form
05th December, 2017
Accepted 15th January, 2018
Published online 28th February, 2018

Key words:

Workforce positions,
Equally importantly,
Unable to gain university entry.

ABSTRACT

The fact that Thailand has entered into the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 has served as a strong incentive and provided an explicit goal to advance as effectively and rapidly as possible the English proficiency of its population. Grounded in research based studies to be cited here, it is believed that the success of Thailand's need to develop the country's economic and political relationships with neighbouring countries, including a far more efficacious tourism industry, depends closely on the English speaking skills of its labour force, both potential and real. The problem is that a crisis situation currently exists in the pedagogic provision of English in Thailand. Considerable evidence has already accumulated to show that the overall English proficiency of Thai graduating secondary students is at a substandard level, thus making them unqualified for many workforce positions, and equally importantly, unable to gain university entry. The 2013 edition of the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), reported differences in the English proficiency levels of non-English speaking countries globally (www.ef-australia.com.au/epi). Thailand was ranked 55th out of 60 countries, thus having one of the lowest levels of English proficiency in the world. Research based studies reveal that the average TOEFL scores for Thailand registered around 450. This result is even lower than the scores of Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, each of which achieved an average score of virtually 500, making the score results for Thailand the lowest in the whole ASEAN region. Our objective here is first to identify the nature and enormity of the crisis that has emerged which relates to the goals set by the Thai government on the one hand, and the current state of impoverished English language proficiency upon which those goals are presumed critically to depend, on the other. Our second aim will be to reflect critically on the current approaches to teaching English, and to identify the specific problems which adversely affect performance outcomes. Once this task is achieved, it becomes easier to propose strategies for their resolution.

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INTRODUCTION

Entering into the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 has served as a strong incentive for Thailand to advance the English proficiency of its population in order to develop the country's successful economic and political relationships with neighboring countries. All stakeholders in Thai education have explicitly acknowledged that acquiring English language skills can improve the destiny and economic success of the country and its people. From top management (e.g. both the government and private sectors) there has been support for schools, colleges, universities and educational institutions to prioritize the teaching and learning of English as their most important mission. There have many projects launched through the increasing collaboration of Thailand with the UK English Language Institute, under the auspices of the British Council to open up new channels of English learning. For example, one initiative has been to import and employ UK undergraduate students as English language assistants in Thailand (British Embassy Bangkok, 2012) (UKTI Digital).

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In addition, another initiative is the Government's 'One Tablet Computer per One Student Policy', which can be used effectively to assist students who are involved learning of English. Although we have to wait to determine the efficacy of these projects, these innovative efforts reflect the ever growing interest in English language learning. Looking at individual educational institutions, Rajamangala University of Technology Phranakorn (RMUTP) is one university which has tried to make improvements in the teaching and learning of English, and one helpful initiative has been, for example, to arrange English camps during the summer holidays. The university has employed ECC (an English Language Institute) to organize these language camps, utilizing its own staff and voluntary tourists as teaching staff. Students have gained enormously from joining the camp and want to be offered this kind of opportunity more often. However, attendance at these camps is not compulsory, and there are still many other initiatives which need to be made, in addition to this innovative enterprise. It is important to recognise that Fourth Year students have to pass an exam designed to examine their English language capacity before graduation.

The university, however, is far from satisfied with the results, and even where students get pass rates, it is questionable whether these exams are comparable to international standard tests such as TOEIC, IELTS, or TOEFL. Given that these students require a reasonably demanding level of English proficiency for their future academic or professional purposes, they are very likely to be disadvantaged. Wiriyaichitra (2002) suggested that the English-language curricula in Thai universities cannot meet the demands of the marketplace. As English teachers; rather than looking for excuses for failure, we should be conducting remedial research programs and cooperating in analyzing English language learning in the classroom to find positive ways forward. As a general principle, we suggest that one salient strategy is to ensure that all stakeholders should have an opportunity to be involved, and that this process could plausibly be facilitated by the establishment of a management team of educational institutes, incorporating English language teachers and university researchers nationwide, working collaboratively to produce research based studies on the most update and efficacious programs of English teaching and learning. It is clear that a cooperative venture such as this would facilitate communication and help to identify the emerging crisis which relates to the goals set by the Thai government, and to evaluate the reasons for the current state of impoverished English language proficiency. It would also provide a shared research context within which the availability of peer group evaluations of the current approaches to teaching English could more easily be initiated to identify the specific problems which affect performance outcomes.

The History and Development of English Language Teaching in Thailand

Before we can get a clear sense of the evolution of the English Language Learning Crisis confronting Thailand, it is apposite to contextualise the problem within the specific pedagogic tradition of language learning that has emerged within Thailand. English language proficiency has become increasingly significant in the world of economics, education, international relations, and technology. It serves as an important universal tool for communication, not only for native speaking countries, but also for non-native speaking countries such as Thailand. Although the English language holds a privileged position as an essential and ever increasingly universal language of international communication, many countries including Thailand regard their own language as an integral dimension of their sociocultural identity. This being so, Thai will remain the official language of the country to preserve the uniqueness of its cultural identity and the goal of homogeneity necessary to engender the foundations for its harmonious nationalisation (Baker, 2008). Unlike many Southeast Asian neighbouring countries, e.g. Burma, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, Thailand has had no experience of formal colonisation by the powerful western countries which earlier inundated and imperialised Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, to strengthen its tourist and other commercial enterprises with these countries, and the western world, Thailand is committed to embracing English as its second language and seeks to achieve at least a modest level of national proficiency. This endeavour is described by Kachru as a vital feature of the 'expanding circle of nations', and the expanding role of 'English used as a foreign language' (Kachru, 1998). Although Thailand was not officially colonised by the West, the Thai educational system

has engaged a long history of flirtation with the English language for more than a century. In the reign of King Rama IV (1861-1869), English was taught to particular groups, including the Royal children and other elite groups connected to them (Darasawang, 2007). The King actually hired a British teacher named Anna H. Leonowens, and an American teacher, John H. Chandler to teach English to his children and to the children of other Thai royals (Sukomolson, 1998; Prapaisit, 2003). At that time, a teaching strategy called the "Direct Method" or "Natural Method" of English language teaching was implemented. English language teaching during this period also emphasised the importance of mastering a competence in reading, writing, and spontaneous translation into and from English to enable Thai officials to negotiate more effectively with foreign traders and diplomats without depending on having a translator present. During the reign of King Rama V (1868 – 1910), the role to be played by the teaching English was significantly expanded when the King designated English as a subject of sufficient importance that it should also be taught in Thai schools. In the reign of King Rama VI (1910 – 1925), English was positioned as a compulsory top priority subject to be learned after grade 4, in all Thai secondary schools. The teaching methodology was focused largely on rote learning and grammar translation. One persuasive incentive for those students who demonstrated a good command of English was the opportunity to be selected as scholarship recipients for study abroad, or be promoted to higher leadership positions after graduation. Lamentably, most learners struggled to learn English and possessed only an impoverished facility with the language.

After the change of the country's political system from a sovereignty to a constitutional monarchy in 1932 (during the reign of King Rama VII), a new national educational plan was enforced (Sukamolson, 1998). English instruction in this plan still held a significant role, thus providing students with an ongoing opportunity to improve their linguistic skills in English. Competency in English was much applauded and regarded as a vital element in achieving the goals of modernising the country. Those individuals with a good command of the English language were used as translators to improve international communication between Thailand and the western world after World War II (1941 – 1945). (Sukamolson, 1998) The increasing number of students aspiring to learn English led the government to augment its support for the employment of Thai teachers of English in its schools. With assistance from American and British organisations, attempts were made to improve the quality of English teaching by replacing Thai's conventional teaching methods from grammar translation and rote memorisation to the 'audio-lingual method' (English for everyday life). Given that the appreciation of English proficiency was elevated as an essential tool to improve international communication and obtain a better comprehension of knowledge from the western world, the substance of the 1960 English curriculum put its emphasis on four linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) incorporated and grounded within a framework of western sociocultural awareness (Sukamolson, 1998). Although English textbooks, coursework books and other materials were provided for teachers to utilise, English teaching and learning during this period was not as successful as anticipated (Darasawang, 2007). The problem was that role of 'rote memorisation' within the context of English language learning was so embedded in virtually every facet of Thailand's

educational traditions across the entire curriculum that students and teachers alike found it difficult to emancipate themselves from the constraints of rote learning (Foley, 2005). Many teachers continued for decades to use rote memory strategies as a prominent feature of grammar-translation method, and eschewed the new western teaching approaches because teachers they lacked the training and thus the self-confidence required to appropriate the western sociocultural approach to English learning as a form of communication (Sukamolson, 1998). The reasons of lacking qualified teachers, too much depending on textbooks, and teacher-centered approach caused English, one of the subjects in the curricula to be changed in compliance with practical communication, life-long learning and learner-centeredness. Furthermore, English language teaching has manipulated a communicative language approach. According to Wiriyachitra (2002), the education reform was carried out between 1996 and 2007 mainly based on 4 areas: school, curriculum, teacher and administrative reform. Learners are a distinct group to be promoted life-long learning to enable them to develop their own pace and capability. In addition, the National Education Act 1999 induces many changes in English language teaching about what to deal with learners in secondary and tertiary levels in various aspects, for example, to encourage thinking skills, decentralize syllabus design, emphasize on individual needs, and employ various educational approaches, especially communicative language teaching approach (Darasawang, 2007; Foley, 2005).

As a result of research conducted by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction Development, there were some defects in the Curriculum B.E. 2521 (1978) (revised B.E. 2533 (1990)). English language learning had been found failings in the development of learners' competencies. The facts were that teachers had insufficient English proficiency and the aims of the curriculum had unclearness (Kulsiri, 2006). The ministry of Education announced the application of the Basic Education Curriculum 2001. In order to meet the real needs of educational institutes and local communities, this core curriculum provided them with the decentralization of educational authority. Schools had more independence to implement their own ideas on what and how to teach English language to their students. Teachers were supported to develop materials in responding to the policy that aimed foreign language teaching to be more learner centeredness and communicative ways. Although the clearer policy on encouraging learners' holistic development had evidence, the Basic Education Curriculum 2001 demonstrated the problematic outcomes. Teachers lacked of the capability and willingness to develop materials for their teaching practices. The recommended textbooks were approved by the Ministry of Education for teachers to use. Nevertheless, the objective and methodology of the coursebooks and those boosted to reach the standards and aims of the National Education Act 1999 had shown incoherency (Watson Todd and Keyuravong, 2004). The framework for 21st Century Learning states that English, one of the core academic subjects, is a fundamental factor for learners' success in their globalized contexts. Thai educational sectors have realized the importance of English role playing and tried to enhance the development plans for English teaching and learning in the country. English language education in Thailand was changed its historical purposes from trading with English spoken countries and strengthening the country's freedom into being a tool for regional and international competition in rapid socio-economical, educational and technological changes. In addition, the

Ministry of Education regarded the country's economic improvement as an urgent need to help people to be able to keep pace with a high competition in the new globalization era (MoE, 2004, p.3). English, a prominent foreign language in the group, is compulsory for all grade levels in Thai education system (MoE, 2004, p.8). Based on these logical reasons, more educational reforms on English language instruction have been taken place. The Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 had been launched to serve Thai educational and economic progress that could lead Education reforms to the clearer goals in advancing learner's quality standards and curriculum application at educational institutions (MoE, 2008). As it can be seen from the history and the development of English language teaching in Thailand, there are more aspects an Education Reform bringing about to help the country and its people move forward to the modern world of economy, education, science, and technology.

English Language Instruction in Thailand today

The change of global society becomes a major factor for learners to know more than their first language. Being educated in foreign languages is very essential to enable learners to attain new knowledge and understand people from different parts of the world. Therefore, English language is imposed on the Basic Education Core Curriculum as a significant subject in a Foreign Language Group. This aims learners to enable to expose their knowledge in the wider range communication at academic and professional contexts (Keyuravong, 2010). Furthermore, as English is one of eight core subjects of the National Curriculum, students are obliged to take English subject on national examination called O-net test (Ordinary Education Test) after each grade level assigned (Grade 6, 9, and 12). Students need O-net test scores when applying for their higher education (Fitpatrick, 2011). Presently, Thai education system requires students to start learning English as a compulsory subject in Grade 1 of Primary schools. Students study English one hour weekly from Grade 1 to 3, and increasingly to two hours and two-three hours a week in Secondary school (Grade 7 – 12). At the tertiary level, undergraduate students should take at least 4 compulsory English courses.

The time set for each English course is generally 3 hours a week. In all, English instructions have provided from students at primary and secondary levels to learn for 12 years, as well as university level for 4 years. (see Table 1, adapted from Keyuravong, 2010). The number of English learning hours organized for students at each level is still questionable whether students' English proficiency can be improved. Concerning with their children being able to possess English language competencies, parents tend to send them to international schools where English is taken as a prominent tool of teaching (Darasawang and Watson Todd, 2012). However, some evidence show English proficiency of Thai students at the lower standard level that makes them unqualified for the workforce and university entry. The most recent edition (2013) of the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), reports English proficiency levels in different countries around the world (www.ef-australia.com.au/epi). Thailand was ranked at 55 out of 60 countries as very low English proficiency. Research based studies reveal that the average TOEFL scores of Thais was at around 450, lower than Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar scored an average of about 500. When compared English learning of Thai students to students

Level	Teaching hours	Languages
Primary 1-3 (Grade 1-3)	40 hours annually (1 hour weekly)	
Primary 4-6 (Grade 4-6)	80 hours annually (2 hours weekly)	English only
Lower Secondary (Grade 7 - 9)	120 hours annually (3 hours weekly)	English as a core foreign language
Upper Secondary (Grade 10 – 12)	80 hours annually + elective hours (2 hours weekly)	Other foreign language
University	120 hours annually (3 hours weekly)	

Table 2. English Language Teaching in Neighbouring Countries

Countries	Levels	Teaching hours
Laos	Secondary school	3 hours a week
	University	4 hours a week
Cambodia	Secondary school	4.5 hours a week
	University	4.5 hours a week
Vietnam	Grade 6-9	4 periods a week
	Grade 10-12	3 periods a week
	University	16 credits (approx. 3 hours a week)
Thailand	Grade 7-9	3 hours a week
	Grade 10-12	2 hours a week
	University	12 credits (3 hours a week)

from neighbouring countries, they have nearly the same amount of time studying English courses (see Table 2, adapted from Darasawang, 2007; Nunan, 2003). English language teaching in Thailand until now, therefore, has appeared some difficulties. What happened to learners and English teachers as former learners after studying English for almost 20 years? Nevertheless, the variable of time for English learning should not be a reason to explain about their poor English proficiency. It is, therefore, making sense to consider the methods and quality of English language instruction. The change and reform for improving the quality of English instruction has been continued propelling through the difficult and successful circumstances. In order to obtain the clearer movement on teaching and learning English language in Thailand, the progress, methods and assessment should be reviewed.

Progress on English Language Instruction

The topic on English teachers' quality has been more repeatedly criticizing in Thai English language education. Teachers' English competencies and skills, particularly at the primary levels, are under qualified to teach English as teachers also lack of their own English language knowledge. Furthermore, at university level, teachers have insufficient both empirical and academic background on teaching English (cited in Hallinger and Kantamara, 2000).

Thai government has given the green light and supports to any projects to increase students' English learning outcomes. English language Institute (ELI) was found in 2007 under the Strategic Plan for Reforming the English Learning Process to Accelerate National Competitive Ability (2006-2010) (Punthumsen, 2007). The first goal was to promote English teaching methods to be more emphasized on communicative approach, and assessment to be more authentic. English teachers, therefore, were key persons to drive up this plan successfully. The ELI took a role as a language training provider to help these teachers in providing professional information and techniques, especially to ones who had a deficient knowledge of English teaching. One initiative plan named "Master Teachers", offered the opportunity for the representatives of teachers and educational staff from English Resource and Instruction Centers (ERIC) to attend workshops or professional development courses organized by the British Council, and later transmit knowledge and skills to other staff.

Another goal of English Language Institute (ELI) associates with the scheme under the government policy to improve English standard level of Thai students. The bilingual education programs emerge widespread the country after getting an approval from Ministry of Education in 1995. ELI has also developed the modern techniques for communicative approach to be demonstrated to Thai teachers in "Expo for Communicative English Language Learning (ExCEL)". The schools with English Program use English as a tool of instruction in most subjects i.e. Science, Mathematics, English and Physical Health Education, except Thai language and Thai studies taught in Thai. Dr. Watanaporn Ra-ngubtook, the Director of the English language Institute stated the sample of English Program conducted in the first public secondary school in Thailand, Yothinburana School. This school advances students' English language learning by providing students with technology learning aids in the classroom and instruction delivered by native English speakers.

There was a claim that English Integrated Studies (EIS) Program of one provincial school, Sunthonphu Pittaya Secondary School received a successful outcome. Students got higher academic scores than those of non-English Program and it was comparable to other English Programs schools in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand (Keyuravong, 2010). For higher education, International Study Programs has provided a great opportunity for university students both undergraduate and graduate level to study their fields in English language. However, the expansion of schools with English Program continues increasingly while this type of school is seeking ways to solve many problems occurred by foreign teachers. Research studies point out the ordinary problems about foreign teachers of English Program schools, including qualifications of teachers in education field; insufficiency number of teacher; and teachers' contribution (Keyuravong, 2010; Punthumasan, 2007). Other than considering the instructors whether they are qualify or unqualify to conduct their English language classroom teaching, the content and methodology for teaching English efficiently has been counted highly important.

English Teaching Methods

Encountering with the failure on teaching English language in Thailand, a learner-centered approach and communicative approach become the prominent solutions. Many scholars have claimed that the traditional English teaching methods

such as grammar translation, rote learning and teacher-centered classroom cause the low standard of English language in the country. Students as passive rote learners in English language classroom keep repeating new English words spoken by their teachers, and memorizing their meaning and structures without fully understanding them (Kirkpatrick, 2012). They can only utilize these words for exams, but speak in their daily lives. The learning process by rote brought about unsuccessful outcomes should not be put as students' fault, stated by Dr. Sippanondha Ketudat, former Minister of Education (Hallinger and Bryant, 2013). In order to change the English language teaching process in school levels, the communicative language teaching approach was promulgated under the 1999 National Education Act. With this type of teaching method, students can develop language skills to be able to apply their language knowledge in the real world. In addition, learner-centered approach is required to increase the effectiveness of teaching and learning English language. Since students do not attend a class together with native speakers, it is difficult for teachers in EFL contexts to find the situations of English interaction for their students (Pinner, 2011). In such a case, English language teachers can merge communicative approach into learner-centered and project-based learning to encourage students' collaborative learning (Darasawang, 2007; Brown, 2007). In the rich culture like Thailand, the idea of integrating local culture set by the Nation Education Act leads the significant learning outcomes.

A student-centered approach has been applied in English Bilingual Education Programs to develop the success of programs. There is the integration of project-based learning to promote students' responsibility and autonomous learning. Schools provide students with outside of classroom activities such as English camps, computer camps, field trips to enable their students to expose English language use to the real situations (Keyuravong, 2010). In fact, the two replaced teaching methods should not lead to the wrong direction of English Education in Thailand as they are globally and found very successful in Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Philippine. However, due to some misunderstandings of a student-centeredness idea, the student-centeredness was criticized in an article of Bangkok Post by students that they were assigned to conduct research in libraries and make reports (Darasawang, 2007). At the tertiary level, various approaches have been applied in 4 English compulsory courses. The development of the curriculum of these English courses underlines the goals and standards. The latest goals set for English Foundations I and II are to enhance social and academic language so that students are able to expose their spoken and written English knowledge to communicate in the real social and educational contexts (Darasawang, 2007). Unfortunately, some evidence given on Sirikul's research analysis show that students cannot reflect their intellectual, moral and physical development from English language learning through a learner-centered approach. They only depend on rote learning and use their limited knowledge when confronting the real situations. She referred to the principles stated in the official documents of

Department of Curriculum and Instruction Development:

“should allow learners to understand and see advantages of what to learn ... teacher and learners can negotiate about learning resources and some of content”.

This infers that curriculum developers and teachers do not concern about learner's needs. The questions of “What and Why to learn?” should be considered at the first curriculum planning, or even some communications between teachers and learners should be taken place in classroom. However, the coherence of principles and real practices did not emerge from the change of English language teaching in Thailand (Sirikul, 2006).

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