

English Language Teaching and Education in Thailand: A decade of Change
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CHAPTER NINE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND EDUCATION IN THAILAND: A DECADE OF CHANGE

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Although English is used only as a foreign language in Thailand, it has played an important role in Thai education for more than a century. To teach English as a foreign language (EFL), several factors have to be taken into consideration such as choices about which language skills to teach and how, where the language will be used, learning environment, selection of appropriate content and materials, and assessment criteria (Graddol 2006). These issues

have been of major concern in the Thai educational system ever since English language teaching first began in Thailand.

This chapter describes the history and development of English language teaching in Thailand with an emphasis on its development in the last decade. In Thailand, the last decade saw numerous social, political, and economic changes, as well as advanced science and technology, with deep impacts on Thai society and traditional ways of life. These changes in turn have demanded a reform in the Thai educational system to enable the nation to cope in the present era of globalisation. The chapter will focus on the movements/projects which have had an impact on many Thai educational institutions at the secondary and tertiary levels. Towards the end, the chapter will cover English language teaching in the neighbouring countries of Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, and will make a projection of the future trends in English language teaching within this region.

History of English Language Teaching

The Thai TESOL Association (Durongphan et al., n. d.) has compiled the history of English language teaching in Thailand as follows. English language teaching has been conducted in Thailand for more than a century. It was started in the reign of King Rama III (1824 -1851) by an American missionary. To cope with the threat of Western colonisation, King Rama IV (1851-1868) himself started to learn English and was the first king who could communicate with foreigners without the help of an interpreter. He employed an English teacher to teach his children and sent scholars to study in Europe. At that time, there were also some commoners studying English. The first English textbook, consisting of elementary lessons, the first workbook, and the first dictionaries (both English - Thai and Thai - English) were also published during this time.

English became the most prestigious foreign language during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), when many foreigners visited Thailand, creating a greater need for English. King Rama V believed that the modernization and progress of the country required more Thais to study foreign languages and be educated abroad. The importance of English can be seen from a ruling issue which stated that those who had completed English Schools' Standard Two could be exempted from military services. The Ministry of Education was founded during this time and more schools for commoners were established. In 1891, English standard was added in the curriculum and examinations. It was a 6 year programme focusing on reading, writing and translation into and from English. Knowledge of English thus enabled Thai officials to deal with foreign traders and diplomats without the need for a translator, and also helped Thai students to learn about modern technologies which helped to develop the country.

King Rama VI (1910-1925), who was educated in Europe wanted to promote Western-style education in Thailand and founded the country's first university. He issued a Compulsory Education Act that required all children between the ages of four to eight years old (grade 1-grade 4) to attend school. English was a compulsory subject to be studied after grade 4. In this period, English received the highest priority, as can be seen from the time allocated for English language teaching, in the secondary school curriculum. As many as seven and a half hours were allocated to English language teaching compared with five hours for Thai and arithmetic. Although there was a change in the curriculum between 1921 and 1928, English was still a compulsory subject.

The method of English language teaching at that time was based on rote memorization and grammar translation. Successful learners tended to win scholarships to study abroad and served as high rank officials when they returned. However, the majority who studied English could not use it functionally.

When the political system of the country changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932 during the reign of King Rama VII, the focus of the educational system was to offer education equally to all citizens and more on political problems. A new English syllabus was introduced in secondary schools. It focused on reading aloud with correct pronunciation and comprehension of the text. Grammar and translation were also emphasized. During World War II (1941-1945), the Japanese occupation of Thailand did not allow the study of English. After war, English became the most useful language for international communication. Some private schools started English language teaching even in grade one. This was the first time that Thailand used Thai teachers to teach English as there was a great increase in the number of learners wanting to study English.

In the 1950's, there was a lot of foreign aids to English language teaching came to Thailand, such as those from the Colombo Plan, the British Council, and the United States Foundation. They aimed at the use of English for everyday life and establishing a basis for further study. English was no longer just for elites. A newly developed aural-oral method was advocated by American and British experts working in Thailand at that time. The change in teaching from the grammar-translation method to the aural-oral method caused some conflicts with Thai traditional teaching methods, as it was thought inappropriate for female teachers to speak loudly, actively move around the classroom and encourage conversations among students.

In 1960, new curricula were launched that required all students beyond grade four to study English. The goals were to enable students to use English as a medium of international communication and acquire knowledge about the world. Students were encouraged to develop their interest in English so that they

could continue studying English at a higher level of education. Therefore, each of the four skills of language learning was given equal emphasis. The Ministry of Education prescribed the textbooks, coursebooks, and supplementary materials to be used. In addition to Thai teachers, many volunteer teachers arrived from the United States, United Kingdom and Canada. Despite such changes to improve English language teaching, many teachers still used the traditional method of reading aloud and translation.

In 1977, the National Scheme of Education was set up that again changed the curricula, which were considered too bookish, academic and teacher-centred. The committee set up to evaluate the 1960 curricula suggested changes intended to encourage practical communication, life-long learning and learner-centredness. English in the curricula at both primary and secondary levels were designed to be more relevant and functional.

According to the 1977 curriculum, all foreign languages except English were elective and should be taught only in the secondary schools. However, any school that wanted to offer English at the primary level had to have qualified teachers and have obtained permission from the Ministry of Education. Finch (1982 cited in Durongphan et al.) thinks that the underlying rationale of this regulation came from the lack of qualified teachers and the belief that learning a second language should be done after the children had already mastered their mother tongue. Although all foreign languages are elective subjects, English is still widely taught as the most useful foreign language and it is one of the compulsory subjects in the National University Entrance Examination, although in theory, the Government does not emphasise the teaching of English.

From history, it can be seen that English has always played an important role in Thai education from the time when it was first introduced, testifying to its importance for the country's economic and technological development. It has been part of the curricula from the primary school to the university level. Approaches to teaching English in Thailand have changed to suit the purposes of studying and to keep up with the principles and theories of teaching discovered in the Western countries. English language teaching for the last 20 years has employed a communicative language approach, which focuses on teaching English for communication rather than just for knowledge about the language. However, there are more aspects added to enable students to learn more effectively and cope with changes in technology.

Education Reform: A Cause of Change in English Language Teaching in the Past Decade

Like many other Asian countries, Thailand went through an education reform in order to cope with the advances in modern technology which

transformed Thai society from an agricultural one to a semi-industrial and service-based one (Pitiyanuwat and Antrasirichai 2002). Other causes also contributed to the education reform, the chief one being the economic crisis in mid-1997 which reflected the country's social and educational weaknesses. Developments in information technology have changed the world and the way of life of many, especially those in the rural areas. The lifestyle of rural people's lifestyle has become more urbanized due to the high-speed telecommunications. In addition, changes in demographic structure and the results of family planning, public health, and medical progress have all had their influence on education reform. With the increasing ratio of older people to younger people, education needs to focus more on human development, i.e., producing qualified manpower for the economic development of the country, and creating a higher quality of life that involves morality, intellectual progress, happiness and lifelong learning.

Education reform in Thailand started in 1996 with the goal of realizing the potential of Thai people to develop themselves for a better quality of life and to develop the nation for peaceful co-existence in the world community (Pitiyanuwat and Antrasirichai 2002). The reform has been carried out in 4 areas: school reform, teacher reform, curriculum reform and administrative reform. The Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC) of the Ministry of Education is responsible for policy making and planning for the primary and secondary levels. As a development from the 1977 curricula, the National Education Act of 1999 stipulated that English was not a compulsory subject. However, foreign languages are still required to be taught in secondary level and most students still choose English as a foreign language as it is a required subject in the National University Entrance Examination.

The objective of learning foreign languages is to facilitate communication, education, and business as it is important for the country to gain economic competitiveness in this era of globalisation. We need to learn about other cultures and countries in order to broaden our vision. At the same time, through learning a foreign language, it is expected that students will understand their own Thai culture better and be more able to represent Thai culture.

According to the new National Education Act, education provision is based on lifelong education for all which focuses on the development of knowledge and the learning process. Every part of society can help to provide education. Compulsory education is now extended to 9 years. Technologies play a more important role, since the National Education Act stipulates that learners should have enough skills and knowledge to use technologies to continuously acquire knowledge by themselves. The major task of education reform thus emphasises the learners. A teaching process which emphasises learner-centredness has to allow learners to develop according to their own pace and potential. This also requires being more aware of individual differences.

The National Education Act brings about changes in English language teaching at both secondary and tertiary levels through decentralising syllabus design, adding local cultural components, encouraging thinking skills, focusing on individual needs, adopting various educational approaches, providing language education and encouraging communicative language teaching methods.

Learner-Centredness and English Language Teaching

In order to change the learning process in Thai schools from a more passive one to one that encourages students to develop critical and creative thinking, a child-centred or learner-centred approach was stipulated in the 1999 National Education Act.

The notion of learner-centredness has been interpreted and put into practice differently. When the 1999 National Education Act was first enacted, schoolteachers came up with different ideas of their own to encourage learner responsibility and independent learning. Some went as far as to not teach the students but direct them to find out more information on their own. Combining learner-centredness with the communicative language teaching approach, which had been prominent idea in English language teaching for the past two decades and is still emphasised in the current National Educational Act, leads to more focus on project-based learning which enables the students to work on their own with less help from the teacher. They have to demonstrate their responsibility in learning by trying to finish assigned tasks. The curricula for secondary schools, established by the new National Education Act, seeks to integrate local cultural components in education, thus, projects for English studies often chose topics related to the local community of the students, such topics included writing brochure to advertise and attract tourists to their provinces. Thus, the use of language becomes more meaningful to the students. The focus on communicative language teaching has been expanded to using the language to communicate in contexts that are more meaningful to the students, rather than just daily communication as it used to be when the communicative approach was first introduced in teaching.

The afore-mentioned idea is the interpretation of learner-centredness in a more positive and correct way. However, there have been many examples of misconduct resulting from misunderstandings of the concept. There were complaints about and criticism of the so-called 'child-centred education system', such as in an article from the Bangkok Post which revealed complaints from students that their teachers had misunderstood the concept by simply assigning the students to do research in libraries and to produce reports. With usually 40-50 students in a class, students were not monitored closely and lazy

students were able to freeload easily through group work (Bunnag n.d.). Also, the projects assigned by the teachers of various subjects often overlapped; students of some schools were assigned 16 projects per week (Seupalang 2006). Many educators expressed their concerns and proposed training teachers in the correct methods of implementing the concept.

The Change in the National University Entrance Examination

One of the factors that has contributed to how English is taught in secondary schools is how it is tested in the National University Entrance Examination, probably the most important examination for Thai students. Like many other Asian countries, the screening process to get into prestigious government universities is demanding. Graduating from particular faculties from particular universities guarantees a secure future. Therefore, the students in secondary schools study especially in order to pass this examination. This goal thus affects the teaching of every subject, including English. No matter how much teachers wish students to learn through communication and involve them in the process of learning, at the end, they have to provide time to give intensive tutorials on grammatical rules and reading for comprehension, as these areas are emphasised in the National University Entrance Examination. The items of the examination are written in a multiple choice format so that it can be graded easily.

Last year, the National University Entrance Examination was changed to include essay writing. It was hoped that this change would improve teaching and learning. Thinking and communication skills could also have been included, as the students now would have to learn how to express themselves rather than just selecting a right answer from out of four or five choices provided in the examination paper. However, because of resulting chaos in the grading of the essay part of the National University Entrance Examination, this year the format will be changed back to multiple choice questions. Still, the addition of an essay part in order to test thinking skills will be explored with the help of technological advances. Once the format of the National University Entrance Examination is changed, it would affect the teaching and learning process in schools.

English at the Tertiary Level

According to the policy of the developmental plan at the tertiary level (2002-2006), the encouragement of international programmes in every field and the exchange of Thai students and foreign students has maintained the importance of English. English is still a compulsory subject at the tertiary level. Undergraduate students are required to take 12 credits or 4 subjects of English

to complete their degree. Of the 4 subjects, the first two subjects taken are foundation courses. The other two are taught as English for specific purposes. The content of these courses is determined by the major of the students e.g. English for medicine, English for engineering, etc. The time allocated for English covers 3-4 periods per week. A period ranges from 50-70 minutes depending on the individual university, but generally, 50 minutes is normally allocated. The universities implement various and different approaches to provide effective language instruction. However, I will focus only on the common aspects among the universities in Thailand, as seen from how the courses are conducted, the themes which have been recurring in various conferences, and the projects which have been funded by the Commission on Higher Education (CHE), the body in charge of higher education in Thailand.

Goals and Standards

One of the movements at the tertiary level which affects language teaching is the attempt to standardise foundation courses. As English is compulsory, the CHE thinks it necessary to monitor English language teaching so that all universities, both governmental and private, will possess the same standards in their courses. Therefore, the Consortium for English compulsory courses was set up in the year 2000 to help develop an English language curriculum. One of the targets aimed at was standardising the compulsory curriculum by mandating 12 credits or 4 courses and proposing goals and standards for English Foundations I and II. The workshop, which involved representatives from the universities throughout Thailand, was held in order to brainstorm what should constitute the goals and standards.

The finalised goals for English Foundations I and II cover the developments of social language and academic language. To develop social language, the students have to be able to use both spoken and written English to communicate in social settings both inside and outside the university. Thus, they would need to know and understand learning strategies to achieve communicative competence. They would also have to be able to recognise and understand cultural differences. With regard to developing academic language, students are expected to access and process information, and to construct knowledge in both spoken and written forms. This includes the use of appropriate learning strategies to acquire, construct and apply academic knowledge, to develop critical skills, and to promote life-long learning (Drafted English Curriculum June 2002).

From the above description, it is obvious that the aim of English language teaching at the tertiary level not only focuses on communication as it used to be, but also addresses the development of learning strategies and how learning is

regarded as a personal construct. These two aspects reflect how English is taught in Thai universities, although not all of them have the same practice because the goals and standards are only guidelines.

The interest in learners as individuals and the process of learning through the application of learning strategies requires an English class in a university to be a place that provides learner training, i.e. training learners how to learn (Dickinson 1987, Ellis and Sinclair 1989, Wenden 1991), rather than focusing only on learning the language. The focus on learning strategies can be seen from coursebooks used in some universities and the content of English courses which are produced in-house where learning strategies, e.g. reading strategies, are presented explicitly. The teachers need to know about those strategies in order to teach the students or make them aware of the learning strategies they need to use.

The idea of standardising language learning has started to cover standardising students' proficiency by adopting the same measures as some other countries have, which is requiring university students to take an English exit examination before graduating. It is hoped that the exit examination would encourage students to study English more as English becomes more important. This measure is also risky in that students may have to depend on tutorial schools once again, as they did before entering university. The format of an exit examination has to be well-thought as examinations are one of the important factors dictating the teaching and learning approaches in Thai education.

Task-Based Learning

With an emphasis on learning strategies and constructivism or the belief that learners construct knowledge differently depending on their individual background knowledge, some schools and universities teach English by using a task-based approach; however, the degree of how it is adopted depends on each university. Task-based learning aims to help students acquire language naturally by completing a given task (Skehan 1998). The task could be a communicative task, which is an essential part of a more complex pedagogic context. Task-based instruction like this is very close to communicative language teaching which focuses on helping the students to complete the task by producing the language learned throughout the unit. Many educational institutions seem to use the task-based approach this way as it is a natural development from communicative language teaching which has been a prominent approach in the last two decades.

The development of communicative language teaching towards a task-based approach started out by using projects to encourage students to apply language they have learned and to use their creativity to complete a project. Recently,

tasks or projects have been integrated with other courses, such as science, culture, and social science, so that students are able to use English more meaningfully. A task-based approach can also be used for full-scale tasks which require students a whole semester for completion. The variations of a task include the use of problems as a task. However, no matter by what name it is called, whether it be a task-based approach, a project-based approach or a problem-based approach, the approach aims at encouraging students' involvement in their own learning, and this is a foundation of a learner-centred approach.

Self-Access Learning

Another phenomenon which has been flourishing in educational institutions at all levels is the setting up of self-access centres to provide students with more exposure to English. A self-access centre provides facilities and materials for students to choose materials which suit their level of proficiency. Working in a self-access centre is also regarded as providing learner-centred teaching as the needs of the individual language learner can be served better than by studying in class with a group. The first self-access centre was set up more than 15 years ago in the university. Self-access centres are quite effective in universities because they are more flexible; students are able to use self-access centres at times convenient to them. Also, university students become more aware of the importance of English, although their motivation to learn English is rather instrumental to finding employment. These two factors make self-access centres useful and attractive to university students.

Self-access centres expanded into primary schools, secondary schools and technical colleges, especially in the last decade. Using these centres is regarded as one aspect to encourage learner-centredness (Watson Todd 2001). The biggest self-access centre project in the country is the one run by the Ministry of Education. In 2004, the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC), which initiated the SEAR project (Student English Access Room), involving 80 secondary schools throughout the country with one centre in each province. The setting up of self-access centre at school has contributed to the promotion of independent learning, especially for English language learning. Students become more familiar with planning, choosing materials to suit their needs and evaluating their own learning when they are required to use the SEAR.

Having a self-access centre in an educational institution does not mean that students would automatically become independent learners; it depends on how it is used to train them. The use of a self-access centre ranges from teachers integrating it into classroom teaching to students using it whenever they want.

Many institutions try to motivate their students to practise English in the centre by granting some marks if they have finished task requirements, e.g. practising 10 exercises in order to get 5%. A self-access centre can also be used to provide learner training. The learner training provided about the use of a self-access centre involves learning strategies, both cognitive and metacognitive strategies, self-assessment, and language awareness. Learners have to analyse their own needs and English proficiency to plan their learning in the self-access centre. Then, they have to choose strategies to deal with a particular task, monitor any problems that arise, and evaluate their learning. It can be said that self-directed language learning is another area of English language teaching which has been of interest in Thailand. At first, it came with the advent of learner autonomy, an educational ideology which also responds to learner-centredness and this ideology has contributed some new practices in language learning circle. For example, teachers are more aware of giving strategy training to their students, involving them in self-assessment and providing more choices in learning. This practice meets one of the stated goals of the current National Educational Act, which is lifelong learning.

Promotion of E-Learning

As stipulated in the current National Education Act, 'learners shall have the right to develop their capabilities for utilization of technologies for education...so that they shall have sufficient knowledge and skills in using these technologies for acquiring knowledge themselves on a continual lifelong basis' (National Education Act, section 66). As a result of the Act, technology has played a greater role in education. Also, in this current information age, technology inevitably plays a larger role in people's lives as it is regarded as a tool for a knowledge-based society. New Knowledge, which can be acquired anywhere in the world via the Internet, needs ICT as a tool.

Thai students learned how to use computers starting at the elementary school level. The Lab School Scheme, which will involve 921 schools from each district in Thailand, reflects the extent to which ICT plays an important role in education (Ministry of Education).

At the tertiary level, e-learning is employed in various manners. However, blended learning or the combination of e-learning and classroom teaching is mostly adopted because it may be the safest way to start with. The CHE has also encouraged the use of e-learning through developing the UniNet infrastructure to connect higher education to the Internet for education and supporting the production of courseware and other e-learning materials. It gives grants to personnel in universities to produce materials on CD-ROM and on-line courseware for the teaching of language skills. As the gap of English

proficiency among university students is very wide, the content of the materials and courseware focuses on students who need some remedy of their English so that they can study on their own to catch up with the language provided in English Foundation I. The produced CD-ROMs and courseware can be accessed by all universities. The English language consortium acts as a quality control body to consider proposals and evaluate programmes.

The use of ICT in English language teaching, learning, and education in general, may not have a big gap at the tertiary level, although some institutions may have a problem with the bandwidth used. However, at the secondary school level in Thailand, there is inequality of the use of ICT. ICT infrastructure is not available in all areas, as a result of many schools not having electricity, creates a so-called 'digital divide' in Thailand. 14.2 % of schools still cannot get access to telephone lines (Suepalang 2003).

International Schools in Thailand

In addition to the above-mentioned projects and phenomena, the change in education which is related to English language teaching is the mushrooming of international schools and English programmes in government schools and private bilingual schools.

The first international school in Thailand is ISB, which was officially founded in 1957 for American children in Thailand. The ISB is owned by the International School Association to offer education from primary to high school using an American curriculum. Other international schools were founded due to the economic development of the country which needed a lot of imported capital and personnel who needed schools for their children. Between 1957 and 1988, the government did not allow Thai students to attend international schools, except at Ruamrudee International School and Bangkok Pattana School, which accepted the children of Thai government officials who used to work abroad. Therefore, it can be said that the international schools were initially set up to provide education to children of foreigners who worked in Thailand, both in investing and working for the government so that they were able to transfer their credits for further education in the US or the UK with convenience.

In 1991, there was a liberalised expansion of international schools; schools could be set up without restriction and the government allowed them to accept Thai students as well but the proportion of Thai students could not exceed 50% of the total population. This expansion was regarded as a response to the global capitalist trend of producing people who could catch up with the world and communicate fluently in English. International Schools thus became a new alternative for middle-class parents who wanted their children to be successful

in the globalisation era, in which people must know another foreign language as their second language and computer literacy as the third language.

At present, Thailand has about 63 international schools with 20,000 students, 65% of whom are foreigners (Seupalang 2002: 5). These international schools provide education from kindergarten to high school. The instruction system ranges from British and American to international systems such as Japanese, French, German, and Swiss. From an economic perspective, these international schools bring income to the country from foreign students, and they are considered as a new alternative for the middle class to create the opportunity for their children to acquire the skill and capability to communicate in a foreign language without having to study abroad. With the increasing number of these so-called international schools, some wrote their own curriculum or added more details to the original objectives and principles of their foreign curriculum without certification from an overseas association or the Thai government. Therefore, only 19 out of 63 international schools are certified to have internationally accepted standards, which enable the learners to transfer credits to institution that uses the same system worldwide (Suepalang 2002:10).

International schools earn more revenue for the country from students that come from the neighbouring countries especially Vietnam. Thailand is also a perfect place of investment for schools and universities in foreign countries that wish to expand their branches overseas since parents are very keen to have their children master English.

English Programme in Thai Schools

The provision of an English programme is also a new phenomenon in Thai education as a result of the new National Education Act which encourages the involvement of the community and stakeholders in providing education. It is regarded as one means to help students acquire English by providing more English exposure to the learners. However, it is only regarded as an option.

In the English programme in primary schools, English, Mathematics, Science and Physical Education can be conducted in English. At the secondary level, all subjects except Thai and Social Science as part of Thai law, culture and tradition can be conducted in Thai. Also, for schools which are not ready to offer a full-scale English programme, they can offer a mini English programme where 50% of the time is allocated for courses instructed in English. At present, there are 75 government schools offering English programmes. In addition to the flourishing of English programme in government schools, the number of private bilingual schools are mushrooming at all levels. The curricula in the bilingual schools follow that of the Ministry of Education but the instruction is

done in both English and Thai. There are special classes taught in English by foreign teachers. So far, there are 121 bilingual private schools, from kindergarten to secondary school level (Ministry of Education)

International Programmes at the Tertiary Level

At the tertiary level, Assumption Business Administration University (ABAC), one of the most prestigious private universities, has offered education using English as a medium of instruction for more than 24 years. International programmes have been offered in other universities for the past 15 years. In those international programmes, English is used as a medium of instruction and the programme also tries to give an opportunity to the learners to take some courses or work in foreign countries. The international programme also includes the curriculum offered from universities in other countries, mainly the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Lecturers from those universities come to give lectures, and the degree is awarded from those universities, or awarded as a joint degree of the Thai university and the overseas university. Strictly speaking, an international programme defined by the CHE should include some specific components such as having international teachers and students, and the students being able to transfer credits to the universities abroad. That means the given international programme should have a link with universities in other countries.

In the next couple of years, the university English curriculum may have to be changed to respond to more students who go through bilingual programmes or English programmes. At present, in every university, there are international programmes offered to meet the needs of those who want to be more exposed to English. However, with more students who had been through more English exposure in secondary school, the current English curriculum may have to be reconsidered.

It can be seen that acquiring English has changed from being the study of one subject in class to acquiring English through study of content subjects. The current job market in Thailand values English, in addition to computer and interpersonal skills for the recruitment of new employees, as a generic and important skill. As there are also a lot of international companies running their business in Thailand, the country has to cope with globalisation; thus, English has become more important than ever. The study of English will become more widespread and exposure to English more pronounced through the increasing number of international schools, bilingual schools, international universities programmes and English courses at Thai schools and universities. That means the time of exposure to English language learning can cover from kindergarten until the PhD level.

However, as the education gap in Thailand is very wide, I think that while some big schools are moving towards providing more English, other schools, especially in provincial area, will still be struggling with upgrading proficiency and the teaching skills of English language teachers.

To summarise, education reform has brought about changes in the teaching and learning of English in Thailand. The pressure of globalisation and Thailand attempts to cope, have also changed the status of English in Thai education, as can be seen from the increasing number of international institutions and English programmes. However, this happens only in Bangkok and big provinces where schools are well-funded. Although the National Education Act is well-written and aimed at directing education to a better position, in reality, it fails to reach students in all areas of Thailand. The disappointing results of school evaluations showed that up to two-thirds of schools throughout Thailand are below standards with regard to the provision of the ICT (Suepalang 2006). This inequality of education and information affects our moves towards a knowledge-based society. Not just ICT infrastructure, but also the quality of teachers affects equality of education.

English Language Teaching in Neighbouring Countries

Like Thailand, students in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam study English as a foreign language; however, because of political reasons, the study of English in those countries has a different status and development.

In Laos, English is one of the subjects the students start to learn when they are at secondary school, studying it for 3 hours a week. Because classes are quite big, about 40–50 students, the teaching approach is rather teacher-centred. The textbooks are designed to suit the context of Laos. Although English is not a compulsory for the university entrance examination, as it is for Thailand, the students are required to study English for 4 hours a week at the university as it is used in the texts the students required to read and to further their study abroad. (an e-mail message between Viengkham Phonpraseuth and the author on October 29, 2006).

An interview with Murray He, an MA Cambodian student, who had worked in a private institution in Cambodia before doing the MA programme at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, revealed that English was not taught in Cambodia until 1993 as the communist government had not allowed it. In the last 4-5 years, English has been a compulsory subject both at the secondary and tertiary levels. It is one of the most important subjects students have to pass to enter university. English is studied for 4.5 hours a week at both the secondary and tertiary levels. At secondary school, textbooks are prepared by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with Australian teachers and

experts. At university, students are required to take the general English programme, especially those who are poor at communication skills. They also have to take an ESP course depending on their specialised fields of study, e.g. IT, Law, Business. Grammar translation is still a widely used approach. However, recently more teachers know about new approaches partly because the country receives some support from Australian teachers and experts. Students who want to study English more can go to private schools which are widespread throughout the country.

English language teaching in Vietnam is not different from Laos and Cambodia. Students can start to learn English at primary school as an optional subject. They are required to study a foreign language in Grade 6 and can choose among English, Chinese and French. However, English is the most prominent language. Secondary school students study English for 3 periods a week (1 period is 45 minutes). At university, students are also required to take 16 credits of English if they choose it as a foreign language, and have to take both general English and ESP courses. Although the Ministry of Education encourages the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), teachers still use traditional methods such as grammar translation. However, the Ministry offers training to teachers (an e-mail message between Nguyen Quang Tuyen and the author on November 12, 2006).

Although the teaching and learning of English in the three countries are still at an initial stage, the government tries to develop and support the learning of English, and it is still the main language for education at a higher level. Because English is learned only in the classroom, it is a challenge for teachers to find ways to develop their students' proficiency. We cannot focus only on methodology or materials, but the training of the language teachers is the most important thing. Teachers in the four countries need to develop their English proficiency together with their teaching approaches. In Thailand, although there are more English language teachers, they are to be found only in Bangkok or the big provinces. The development of English language teachers is still the main aim of the Ministry of Education. Lacking qualified English language teachers was regarded as the main obstacle to develop the teaching of English. It is a severe problem especially when communicative language teaching is mainly used. This situation also occurs in Vietnam and Cambodia where the training of English language teachers is concurrent with the introduction of new methodology for effective teaching.

Projection for the Future

As English is the global lingua franca, it is important for people in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam to learn it for education, business, and personal

development. As seen from the development of how English is taught in this region, the main concern is how to help learners acquire the language better and more effectively in the learning environment where English is treated as a subject at school or university, or studied as a foreign language.

In Thailand, the struggling to improve the learning process will still go on with the emphasis on learner-centredness through educational management and facilities. Developing English language teachers both in English proficiency and teaching methodology, especially with the correct concept of learner-centredness, has to be conducted at the same time.

Another area which will be more emphasised in the English language teaching circle in Thailand is research in English language teaching as it is required both at school and at the university. English language teachers are required to develop research skills in addition to teaching skills.

Although there are some obstacles to the development of English language teaching to reach the same standard for all schools and universities throughout the country, I believe that the situation as a whole would move in a positive direction, as we are all well-aware that English is the global lingua franca. Although young people have started to learn a third language such as Chinese or Japanese, English is still the second language Thai students need to acquire, and the main aim of teachers of English is to find the most effective way to teach them.

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