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**The Effect of Policy on English Language Teaching at Secondary Schools in Thailand**

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**Abstract**

In Thailand, education is the main area in which language policy is enacted, and this paper investigates foreign language policy and practice, especially concerning English, in an attempt to shed light on language policy. We identify seven sources of English language education policy, namely, the National Education Act, national education standards, Ministry of Education recommended textbooks, isolated Ministry of Education initiatives, demand-driven changes in the types of schools, test washback, and decentralised decision making. We show that these sources present conflicting versions of policy. To examine how the policies are implemented in practice, we interviewed principals and teachers at four representative government secondary schools. The findings show awareness of the various policies but a great diversity in how they are implemented. The overall picture of language policy in Thailand as manifested in English language education policy, then, is one of conflicts and confusion with no clear relationship between policy and practice.

Thailand is a country where over 80 languages are spoken, but where, for reasons of nation-building, one language, Thai, dominates especially in official and media uses (Smalley, 1994). Indeed, the domination of Thai is such that some of the other commonly spoken languages are referred to as dialects of Thai; for example, the kham muang language of northern Thailand is often referred to as the northern dialect of Thai (Rappa and Wee, 2006). The only language that has come close to challenging the official and media dominance of Thai is English (Masavisut et al., 1986). In mid-2010, the Minister of Education suggested that, to promote better learning of English, the language should be made the second official language of the country. He withdrew this proposal the next day on the grounds that having English as an official language “could lead to misunderstandings that Thailand had been colonised in the past” (Bunnag, 2010: 5); instead, at most English should be the first foreign language. The short-lived proposal of English as an official language highlights the two key influences on language policy in Thailand. First, language policy is heavily influenced by nationalistic concerns (Feigenblatt et al., 2010) to the extent that there is very little explicit official documentation concerning language policy available, perhaps on the basis that such documentation could raise questions about the centrality of the Thai language to the nation. Second, education is the major area in which language policy is enacted in Thailand. The dominance of Thai in a linguistically diverse country comes from attempts to create linguistic “unity which the government works hard to promote through the educational system” (Smalley, 1994: 4), and much of the stimulus to promote English has educational roots. The few language policy documents that do exist concern language in education. In these documents, Thai dominates for reasons of national security and racial integration with English being the only foreign language specified as useful for information dissemination (according to the 1978 Basic Curriculum issued by the National Education Council; see Rappa and Wee, 2006). In this paper, we will investigate the role of English in Thailand. Given the dearth of explicit documentation on language policy outside of education, we will examine English in Thailand by focusing on educational policy and its implementation.

### **A brief history of English language teaching in Thailand**

The first record of English language teaching in Thailand comes from 1824 when the language was taught to diplomats, and formal teaching of English was restricted to royalty and courtiers through subsequent decades. It was not until 1891 that the first English school was set up with the rationale that English was vital for learning other subjects since most textbooks were in English. Later, in 1921 the first Compulsory Education Act set English as a subject to be studied from Grade 5 (Durongphan et al., n.d.). Nevertheless, before World War II, the learning of English (and, indeed, education beyond a 3-year minimum) was restricted to an urban elite. The 1940s and 1950s saw two major changes that promoted English as the foremost foreign language in education. First, nationalist governments wishing to promote the Thai language closed hundreds of Chinese- and Malay-medium schools during this time (von Feigenblatt et al. 2010). Second, especially with the growing influence of America and with substantial foreign aid from English-speaking countries, English was seen as

particularly useful for both trade and higher education leading to a greater emphasis on English as a foreign language in national curricula (Darasawang, 2007).

English language teaching, then, has a venerable history in Thai education, and has been the main foreign language taught for at least 50 years with the result that nearly all students in Thailand learn English for several years. Despite the emphasis placed on English in the education system, the general level of English proficiency in the country is very low. In 2005, the Educational Testing Service released figures comparing proficiency testing in countries in South-East Asia with Thailand coming eighth of nine countries, scoring lower than Laos and Vietnam and only just outscoring Cambodia leading to an outbreak of national concern (Bunnag, 2005). Reasons suggested for such low levels of English include the fact that English is a foreign language in Thailand (especially when compared with countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippine) with little general social exposure to the language especially for the rural majority (Rappa and Wee, 2006), and a possible lack of a culture of foreign language learning perhaps due to Thailand never having been colonised (Watson Todd, 2006). It may also be possible that educational language policy and its implementation is a cause for the poor outcomes from English language learning in Thailand, and thus we will now turn to examining policy issues.

### **English language educational policies in Thailand**

Educational policies concerning English run the full gamut from formal legal acts passed by parliament to implicit policies based on how the Thai educational system is set up. In this section, we will examine seven sources of language education policies.

#### *The National Education Act of 1999*

Stemming from requirements in the 1997 Constitution, in 1999 the National Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999) was promulgated to provide a coherent framework to govern Thai education over the succeeding decades. Driven by a desire to reform education, the Act requires changes in nearly all areas of education, including administration, standards and personnel. It has been described as "an ideal law that upholds the philosophy of education [and] makes the process of learning the priority" (Bangkok Post, 2002: 11) by including sections governing the objectives of education and the learning process. One of the five key objectives of education is "Knowledge and skills in mathematics and languages, with emphasis on proper use of the Thai language" (Section 23) while the guidelines on the learning process include accounting for individual differences, training in thinking skills and problem solving, learning from authentic experience, using technology, and promoting lifelong learning (Section 24). It should be noted that English is never specifically mentioned in the Act. However, the Act also states that "The Basic Education Commission shall prescribe core curricula for basic education" (Section 27) and it is in these curricula based on national standards that English comes to the fore.

#### *National Education Standards and Curricula*

Educational standards governing all levels of education at a national level were set for the first time in 2004 (Office of the National Education Council, 2004) and are organised in a hierarchy from the most general standards covering all of education through to specific standards applying to a single subject at a single educational level. At the most general level, there are only three standards (The Thai people will be competent, virtuous and lead a happy life; Emphasis on learner-centred approach and school-based administration for education provision; Enhancing ways of learning and strengthening learning sources) and eleven indicators, and, as with the National Education Act, English is not mentioned. At the more specific levels, however, English is one of the subjects for which standards have been set, and we will examine the standards for foreign language learning at the secondary level. Four broad goals for foreign language teaching are set:

- Communication focuses on effective communication, fluency, understanding the culture of native speakers, and knowing how to apply the language and cultural awareness to communicate appropriately.
- Culture covers knowledge and understanding of the culture of the target language and its influence on Thai culture.
- Connection aims at linking the target language to the content of other subjects.
- Community covers project work and application outside the classroom.

These goals are used to guide the setting of specific standards for teaching at the various grades of secondary education. These standards include (Ministry of Education, 2001a):

- Search for an effective way of learning a foreign language and for one's own effective learning style (Substance 1 Standard 1.2)
- Be capable of communicating ... creatively, efficiently and aesthetically (Substance 1 Standard 1.3)
- Understand the similarities and differences between Thai culture and the culture of the target language (Substance 2 Standard 2.2)
- Use English language in searching for knowledge relevant to other subjects to widen world knowledge (Substance 3 Standard 3.7)
- Use English specifically for communication, management in learning, further education and careers (Substance 4 Standard 4.2)
- Use English to work with other people harmoniously by being able to control oneself, respect other people's thoughts and ideas, express one's own feelings appropriately, and negotiate with and convince other people rationally (Substance 4 Standard 4.2)

While several of these goals and standards are uncontroversial, one interesting point worth highlighting is the understanding of culture embodied within them. Culture, as it relates to foreign language learning, is seen as concerning the culture of native speakers. In an era where English as an international language is coming to the fore, such a view of culture seems outdated. It may also be inappropriate as a basis for teaching English, since much use of English in Thailand is likely to involve two non-native speakers where the native speaker culture is irrelevant. For instance, in the tourism industry, one of the main professional uses of English, only 17% of tourist arrivals come from countries associated with native speaker culture, whereas around half of tourists come from other Asian countries (Chinmaneevong, 2010).

### *Ministry of Education recommended textbooks*

The standards for English teaching and learning in Thailand are very general and could be implemented in a wide variety of ways. To concretise the standards and to help teachers, the Ministry of Education (e.g. 2001b; 2010) provides a list of recommended coursebooks for teachers to use. In the 2001 list, some of the books recommended were very dated such as *Kernel* of the audiolingual era (O'Neill, 1971/1978). An analysis of the recommended coursebooks (Watson Todd and Keyuravong, 2004) has shown that the language points covered in the books mostly concern grammar, that the culture of the books is either British or American, that the content is largely trivial, and that closed-ended exercises predominate (a pattern that still seems to hold with the newer books on the more recent list, e.g. Broukal, 2004). The objectives and methodology of the coursebooks, then, do not match the objectives and methodologies promoted by either the National Education Act or the standards. In fact, the only clear match concerns the focus on native speaker culture which, we have seen, is problematic.

### *Isolated Ministry of Education initiatives*

While the National Education Act, standards and recommended books could (but unfortunately do not) provide a coherent framework for English language education, another source of policy is dependent on the beliefs of individuals. Incoming Ministers of Education wish to make their mark and so initiate and provide funding for projects based on their personal beliefs about education. For instance, in 2005, following the interests of a new Minister, there was a flurry of activity promoting brain-based learning as the future of Thai education. A National Institute for Brain-based Learning was set up and provided with substantial funds (initially 340 million baht or 11 million US dollars), curricula were designed following the theory, and schools were selected to implement the approach (Watson Todd, 2005b). With a change of Ministers, however, brain-based learning was replaced by the next fad. If Ministers lasted for several years in the position, these isolated initiatives might have some meaningful impact. With 12 politicians holding the post of Minister of Education in the last ten years, however, the reality is that Ministers' initiatives add an extra burden on schools as they are required to show that they are implementing the Ministers' pet project which within a year is likely to be replaced by the next project.

### *Policies concerning types of schools*

In mainstream schools, English is restricted to specific English language lessons taught for one hour a week in grades 1 to 3, 2 hours a week in grades 4 to 6, and 3 hours a week on average in secondary schools. However, demand by parents for their children to be proficient at English has led to the establishment of various schools and programmes that place a greater emphasis on English. At the extreme are English-medium international schools which, until 1991, were not allowed to accept Thai nationals as students unless their parents were diplomats (Wanchupela, 2007). With the opening of international schools to Thais under the Education Act of 1991, their numbers jumped massively from 4 in 1990 to 106 in 2006 (Office of the Education

Council, 2006) with concurrent concerns about quality. Driven by market demand, private and government schools followed the lead of international schools and started to provide programmes where two to four core subjects were taught through English in addition to the normal English language classes, with 332 schools offering such programmes in 2009 (Keyuravong, 2010). Although more expensive than mainstream schooling, the success of these programmes means that English is starting to take on the role of the language of education by default.

#### *Test washback*

Although not designed as policy instruments, tests have a major washback impact on teaching and learning, and thus could be considered implicit policy tools. English is a required subject in national education tests taken at grades 6, 9 and 12 and in the university entrance exam which is probably the most influential exam in Thailand. The university entrance exam system was set up in 1967 and consisted solely of multiple-choice tests until the late 1990s. In 1998, grades from secondary school were taken into consideration in the entrance system comprising 10% of the score, with the remaining 90% still coming from the entrance exam. It was planned that the proportion of the entrance score derived from school grades would steadily increase to 70%, but the highest contribution it has reached is 30% in 1999. While the inclusion of secondary school grades reduces the influence of multiple-choice testing, this reduction is minimal since, on average, 50% of the marks for school grades come from multiple-choice tests (Piboonkanarax, 2008). A more significant attempt to reduce the influence of multiple-choice testing was made in 2006 when, for the first and only time, open-ended questions were included on the entrance exams. So, despite constant minor changes to the entrance exam system, multiple-choice tests still dominate Thai education with washback effects meaning that testing, and thus teaching, focuses on simplistic, non-transferable knowledge especially of grammar and vocabulary, lower-order thinking, ephemeral memory, and receptive skills (Watson Todd, 2008). From the perspective of policy, the heavy washback from multiple-choice tests means that many enlightened and forward-looking policies have little effect in practice.

#### *Decentralised decision making*

The National Education Act of 1999 stipulates that the Ministry of Education “shall decentralize powers in educational administration and management regarding academic matters” (Section 39, Office of the National Education Commission, 1999). Although the full decentralisation process has been constantly delayed, one outcome of this policy has been that schools have been encouraged to create their own curricula accounting for at least 30% of teaching which focus on and serve the local community (Ministry of Education, 2001a). Until a recent about-face, this meant that schools were expected to design their own English learning materials based on the issues and needs of the local community. Unfortunately, the needs for English of the local communities were often unclear, especially in remote upcountry communities, and teachers often did not have the skills to design effective materials (Wall, Hull and Srimavin, 2008). The decentralisation policy in practice, then, often resulted in a hotchpotch of poorly designed materials with no relation to any other policies.

### **Policy and practice in English language education in Thailand**

While there may be little official documentation directly concerning language policy in Thailand, from the above we can see that there is a substantial amount concerning educational policies for the English language, much of which has implicit implications for a broader interpretation of language policy. However, there are numerous conflicts between the different sources of policy. The stipulations of the National Education Act are not manifested in the national standards, which in turn do not form the basis for the recommended books; Ministers of Education promote and implement their own pet projects which bear no relationship to the Act or standards; the market for English creates demands leading to a new role for English not explicitly considered in other documentation; the national tests mean that all policies and initiatives are modified in practice because of washback; and the policy of decentralisation means that the actual impact of all the other sources is unclear as schools have the right to implement their own curricula. In other words, English language education policy in Thailand is a mess.

Even if the various sources of policy did provide a clear direction, it is unclear to what extent a clear policy would affect classroom practice. A coherent and beneficial policy is of little use if it is not implemented effectively. Unfortunately, the Thai Ministry of Education has gained an unwelcome reputation of ineffective top-down imposition of policy on schools and teachers (Watson Todd, 2005a). The ineffectiveness of the implementation of policy can be seen in two ways. First, senior education figures in Thailand almost constantly complain about the prevalence of rote learning in the education system and the need to change (e.g. Srisa-an, 2007, then-Minister of Education; Johnson et al., 2009 quoting the then-Minister of Education). The repetitiveness and frequency of such complaints suggest that any policies are not being implemented effectively. Second, even when teachers are aware of policies and agree with them, their ratings for how the policies affect their teaching are consistently lower than their levels of agreement with the policies (Thongsri et al., 2006). Therefore, there appears to be a significant gap between the policies (whatever they are) and their implementation. To investigate the nature of this gap, in other words, the relationship between policies and practice, we interviewed principals and English teachers at four secondary schools.

### **Data collection**

The four secondary schools chosen for data collection are all in Ratchaburi province, since this province is representative of many other provinces with a large municipality, extensive agricultural areas centred around market towns, and some remote villages in mountainous areas. The four schools represent a cross-section of schools in the province and are:

1. Ratanarasbumroong School, a large school (2,700 students) with a good reputation in a major agricultural area.
2. Wat Dontoom School, a medium-sized school (1,000 students) in a less privileged agricultural area.

3. Kururatrungsarit School, a medium-sized school (1,600 students) which was selected as part of the Dream Schools project and so has received higher than average funding.
4. Ban Ka Wittaya School, a small school (700 students) in a slightly more remote area.

Originally, it was our intention to interview the principals and most of the English teachers at all four schools. However, the principals of the second two schools above were not available on the dates of the interviews, so data was collected from only two principals, but from English teachers at all schools.

The interviews with the principals were conducted as free interviews with the goal of finding out the school's policies, especially for English and also in relation to the seven sources of policy. The interviews with the teachers were more structured and aimed to elicit their knowledge of national policies, how they implemented these policies, and the content, materials and processes used in teaching. All interview data were analysed to identify awareness of and implementation of policy as well as educational practice at the school.

### **The principals' school policies**

There was a marked contrast between the two principals in their concern for English language teaching. Despite knowing that the purpose of the interview was to elicit school policy on English teaching, the principal of Ratanarasbumroong School avoided discussion of English and focused on his policy to upgrade ICT at the school, illustrating the impact of a principal's personal interests and concerns on school policy:

*The results from the quality assurance showed that we needed to work more on ICT ... The issue of ICT is also my idea to develop this school because I took care of the ICT project in Ratchaburi before moving to be the principal of this school ... I am interested in educational media.*

Unlike the principal of Ratanarasbumroong School, the principal of Wat Dontoom School, which has won a prize for its English language teaching, was concerned about English language education and had made numerous initiatives promoting English and educational development:

*My policy about English language learning is to have students learn English by themselves. We have English resources centre and technology used in English language teaching but they are not enough ... We also have a sound lab and an English Innovation room ... We have various English activities ... We also have the Love Reading Project in every subject matter. All the subjects can be integrated with one another ... I came up with the policy myself by looking at our context and the resources we have; we apply the policy of the Ministry of Education only when appropriate ... The strategic plan provided by the Ministry is broad so we*



*should have our own strategy ... Dontoom Plan was created by every teacher ... We don't care much about quality assurance but we care more about developing ourselves ... We focus on innovation from doing research ... every teacher has to do it and submit it to the school administrators ...*

While clearly differing in the emphasis they place on English, the interviews with both principals highlight the power of individual schools to make their own policies in line with decentralised decision making.

### **The teachers' classroom practice**

As with school policy, the interviews with teachers reveal a great diversity in classroom practice. In part, this diversity in practice reflects the different school policies. For instance, at Ratanarasbumroong School where the policy emphasis is on ICT:

*There is a multimedia room and a sound lab ... we use the Internet when preparing the teaching materials and ask the students to search for information.*

The various policy sources also have an impact on practice. At Ratanarasbumroong School, practice is influenced by the Ministry of Education recommended textbooks and possibly by some broad objectives in the National Education Act (such as training in thinking skills), although the emphasis placed on reading in the Act is ignored:

*The texts used are chosen from the list of texts provided by the OBEC [Office of the Basic Education Commission] and we add other books. We mainly teach four skills ... We use project work in the English class of Mattayomsuksa 6 [equivalent to Grade 12] to enhance the thinking process ... we don't focus on reading much.*

The Ministry of Education textbooks and the National Education Act have a clear influence on classroom practice at Wat Dontoom School as well:

*We taught every skill as stated in the four strands and focus on reading because it is emphasized in the 1999 National Act ... we encourage the students to read 20 stories and record what they read in a learning log ... we chose the texts from the list provided by the OBEC ... choosing the level of difficulty, up-to date content and vocabulary which is specified in the syllabus ... problem-solving is the thinking skill integrated in the learning process ... we chose to use only the relevant policy from the OBEC and the Local Area Education Office to be used.*

Indeed, Wat Dontoom School appears to pay more attention to the National Education Act and the National Education Standards than the other schools as

evinced by a prominently displayed statement of the policy goals of foreign language teaching in the department:

*Learners have discipline, morality, knowledge, and good attitudes towards English. They should be able to use English to communicate in various situations, to seek knowledge to work and further their education. Also, they should understand the Thai culture and the native speaker's culture.*

The interviews with the teachers of the other two schools, Kururatrungsarit School and Ban Ka Wittaya School, show how different policies can impact practice. Kururatrungsarit School is a so-called Dream School, an initiative started by the then-Minister of Education in 2004. A dream school is a well-equipped school which acts as a model for other schools in the district. Although the funding for dream schools has been reduced in recent years, generally they still provide more facilities for students and a higher quality of education than the average school. The facilities available at Kururatrungsarit School allow the teachers to organise learning in ways which might not be possible at other schools:

*We have an E-classroom which the students can use during lunch time and during their free time. The students can choose to study according to their interest such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar ... English study is a compulsory for the students during their free hour [normally this period is allocated as a free elective for the students], so they will have five hours of English per week.*

As with other schools, the broad objectives of the National Education Act have been put into practice at Kururatrungsarit School, as has the need to incorporate local content into learning as envisaged by the decentralisation policy. However, the school has chosen not to use textbooks from the Ministry of Education's recommended list:

*Project work is integrated in the English course ... it emphasizes information search and tourist attractions in Ratchaburi. The students will present these tourist attractions in English and simple conversation related to traveling ... Reading is also encouraged ... the students have to record their reading and give comments on it ... the teachers chose the texts based on appropriateness, convenience and up-to-date content ... the text should cover the overall content.*

The final school, Ban Ka Wittaya School, is the smallest and the least privileged school. While the teachers here appear to be aware of objectives from the National Education Act and the standards (and even perhaps attempt to have an element of English medium education in other subjects), their attempts to reach these objectives have been so fraught with problems that their teaching has become guided more by test washback than by the other policy sources:

*We use short stories to teach English...try to integrate English with other subjects ... It takes time to have the students do activities in class ... we chose the texts on the list, but we also adapt the content as appropriate ... we also consider the national test when we design what to teach ... grammar is our main focus, but we also teach four skills ... we prepare the content by searching for it on the Internet and preparing worksheets from old texts ... the school supported reading activity but the students were not very interested ... we used to have some activities to enhance English language reading ... we have the students recite vocabulary in front of the flagpole in the morning ... taking turns between Thai and English vocabulary.*

The extent to which the teachers' responses in the interviews reflect actual practice is unclear, but, taken at face value, two patterns emerge. Overall, although there are some similarities in practice between the four schools, such as in using project work and technology to aid learning, the differences are more noticeable. Similarly, although there are some similarities in the policy sources influencing practice, such as the impact of the broad objectives of the National Education Act, the differences are more noticeable with all of the policy sources having some influence in at least one school.

## **Discussion**

Foreign language education policy can be viewed as affecting education practice in three main ways: influencing the processes of teaching and learning, influencing the content to be taught, and influencing how education is set up at a systemic level. We will discuss the policy documentation and classroom practice as shown in the interviews on the basis of these three levels.

From the interviews with principals and teachers, most of the information concerned processes of teaching and learning, especially the promotion of learner-centredness and the use of technology. The teachers' focus on these issues suggests that the broad process objectives of the National Education Act have created a certain mindset in teachers, but the extent to which this mindset leads to successful learning is unclear. On the one hand, the popular discourse on English language education in Thailand is still replete with complaints that rote learning is prevalent; on the other hand, students have complained that learner-centredness in practice is tantamount to student neglect by teachers (Bunnag, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, beyond showing high levels of awareness of the goals of the National Education Act, the focus on processes of teaching and learning tells us little about the impact of language policy.

The content to be taught may provide more insights into language policy than the processes of teaching. For instance, the policy statement displayed at Wat Dontoom School implies that English is taught for purely instrumental purposes and also prioritises native speaker culture, both issues highlighted in the policy documentation. However, there is surprisingly little in the interviews concerning content so no clear conclusions can be reached.

Practices at the systemic level, such as the allocation of an extra hour for English at Kururatrungsarit School and the variety of support facilities for English at Wat Dontoom School, perhaps provide the most insight into language policy by highlighting the extent to which English is valued in terms of time and budget. As with content, however, there is little in the interviews concerning systemic practices.

The clearest issue emerging from the interviews is the diversity of practice and of policy sources used to inform practice. For instance, regarding practice, Ratanarasbumroong School largely ignores teaching reading, whereas Wat Dontoom School views reading as the key skill to be taught. Regarding policy, there is some evidence that all seven sources of policy influence practice. However, individual schools appear to pick and choose which sources and which policies they implement. Three of the schools use the list of recommended textbooks as the basis for choosing classroom texts, whereas at the other school teachers do not base their choices of texts on this list. In fact, while the schools and teachers appear aware of the various policies, they do not seem to be constrained to follow them: “we apply the policy of the Ministry of Education only when appropriate”, and “we chose to use only the relevant policy”.

The power of schools and teachers to choose between policies and to set their own practices could be seen as evidence for the success of decentralised decision making in Thai education. However, the fact that more formal aspects of administration such as budgeting have yet to be decentralised casts doubt on this conclusion. Rather, the sheer number of and conflicts between different policies may mean that schools are unintentionally empowered to make their own decisions. In fact, it could be argued that schools could do whatever they wanted and still be able to find some policy from some source that justifies their practice. The conflicts between the various policies and the lack of any clear relationship between policies and practice have implications for language policy research. In Thailand, at least, it seems likely that policy research focusing on one or two sources of policy documentation and not accounting for how such documentation is put into practice would lead to a biased and invalid view of language policy in the country.

To conclude, the various sources, taken individually, provide some idea of how educational policy manifests language policy. However, the conflicts between different sources and the power of schools to pick and choose which policies to implement mean that the idea of official documentation providing a coherent language policy for Thailand is an illusion.

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