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The MinEd Game: An interactive website on education policy

By Richard Watson Todd, Thailand

The staffroom was buzzing with chatter. The Ministry of Education had just announced a project where English teachers would be swapped between schools for four weeks. The school director had asked for three teachers to volunteer. “I can’t do it - the traffic’s terrible over there.” “That school’s got a really bad reputation, I don’t think I could handle it.” “I don’t know, it could be an interesting experience.” “What sort of stupid idea is it anyway? The Ministry just wants to make teachers suffer.”

When authorities initiate new projects or issue new regulations, teachers naturally tend to view them in terms of their personal impact. Admittedly, it is difficult to see any reasonable rationale behind some proposals, but in most cases there are good reasons (even if you disagree with them). An understanding of education policy can help teachers see how their own work fits into the bigger picture, can reduce the feelings of vulnerability and emotional disturbance that policy reforms often engender (Kelchtermans, 2005), and can decrease opposition to the policy (Smit, 2003).

Despite these potential benefits, an explicit focus on understanding education policy is not common in teacher education programmes. A quick survey of MA TESOL programmes from around the world shows that only 3 of 16 programmes include explicit mention of education

policy in the curriculum. There are two possible reasons for this general omission. First, amid the myriad demands of content to be included on programmes, policy may simply be a lower-priority topic which gets pushed out by other more pressing issues. Second, policy is not an area which is easy to teach. As a complex issue, policy is not particularly amenable to a transmission approach such as lecturing, and discussions on policy often devolve into biased arguments, whether for or against a policy, focusing on personal concerns. In this article, I would like to present an innovative way into understanding education policy - an interactive, web-based policy game.

The MinEd Game website

My starting point for developing the MinEd game was discussions with a colleague about the need for the Ministry of Education in Thailand to implement projects to improve ELT. We had concerns about the lack of any rational basis for choosing between different projects and the limited public input into education policy in Thailand. At around the same time, I read an article in *New Scientist* about a game which had been developed to help UN policy makers working in South Sudan (see Landwehr et al., 2013). Bringing these two points together, I decided to develop a website with a slight gaming element to raise awareness of ELT policy in Thailand. For this to be useful, it needed to be as close to reality as possible and to represent the complexity of choosing projects in the real world.

In the MinEd Game (<http://meg.ibankstory.com/>), the user plays the Thai Minister of Education, and the goal is to use a Ministry budget to choose projects that improve secondary-level ELT and education in general in Thailand. To evaluate the improvements from the

projects, the website starts by explaining the criteria to be used to judge the effectiveness of Thai English language education. These are all real criteria and include international ratings such as the English First EPI score (see <https://www.ef.co.th/epi/>) and national education data such as the secondary school enrollment rates.

The Ministry of Education Game

In this game, you will play the Thai Minister of Education. You are worried about levels of English in Thailand, and want to improve English teaching and learning at secondary schools. You need to decide which projects to spend money on to achieve this goal.

Continue

ในเกมนี้ คุณจะแสดงบทบาทเป็นรัฐมนตรีว่าการกระทรวงศึกษาธิการ คุณกังวลเรื่องระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทย และต้องการปรับปรุงการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษในโรงเรียนมัธยมศึกษา คุณต้องตัดสินใจว่าโครงการไหนจะใช้เงินให้บรรลุเป้าหมายของคุณได้

ดำเนินการต่อ

The Ministry of Education Game

The current situation:

- 3,000 secondary schools covering M1 - M6
- 6 million secondary school students
- 40,000 secondary English teachers

You have a discretionary budget of 2,000 million baht which you are free to use as you wish.

If you need more money, you can take money from the secondary schooling subsidiary budget but this may have negative consequences (to do this, click on the 'Need money from subsidy budget' link where it is available).

Before you see what projects you can spend money on, you need to be aware of the criteria for evaluating Thai education

Learn about the Criteria

Once users are familiar with the criteria, they are presented with a range of 51 projects to choose from, together with a budget of 2 billion baht (\$60 million). The projects fall into six categories (teacher training projects, projects employing foreign teachers, projects changing the education system, projects changing national exams, non-formal learning projects, and projects addressing underperforming schools), with each project having different impacts on the criteria and different costs (which are as realistic as possible in 2018). For example, employing a native speaker teacher at all secondary schools would cost 1.3 billion baht (\$40 million) and is likely to improve general English levels but have little effect on the grammar-oriented national exams; whereas the school buddy system swapping teachers between schools (as in the imaginary vignette at the beginning of this article) would cost 50 million baht (\$1.5 million) and focuses on reducing inequalities in education, especially between Bangkok and rural areas. The effects of the projects on the criteria are largely based on research. For example, adding an essay component to the currently exclusively multiple-choice national exams should improve general English writing proficiency levels in the long run (based on the experiences of other countries) but will lead to lower scores on the exams and will exacerbate inequalities between Bangkok and upcountry schools (based on the results of the single previous attempt to do this).

There are many different criteria that can be used to evaluate education, and often improving one criterion may lead to a decrease in another. In this game there are 9 criteria that are used. As Minister of Education, in aiming to improve English education in Thailand, you may value certain criteria more highly than others. You therefore need to be familiar with the criteria and choose projects which will influence your favoured criteria. Here are the criteria. (TH)

Criterion	Ideal score	Thailand's current score	Rationale
Overall education quality	100	51	Based on data from the World Economic Forum, a high number shows better education quality. Thailand's score of 51 means it is the 78th ranked country in the world
English First EPI score	100	50	A high number shows that general English proficiency in Thailand is good (numbers from 49 to 52 indicate Low proficiency)
Average TOEFL iBT score	120	76	A high number shows that the average Thai scores highly on the TOEFL iBT test. Thailand's score of 76 means that it is the 115th ranked country in the world
ONET M6 average score for English	100	28	A high number shows that the average Thai scores highly on the ONET English section
ONET M6 average score for English from Bangkok	100	38	A high number shows that the average Bangkokian scores highly on the ONET English section
ONET M6 average score for English from upcountry	100	26	A high number shows that the average upcountry student scores highly on the ONET English section
Level of equality in education comparing Bangkok and upcountry	100	68	A number close to 100 shows that there is no difference in quality between Bangkok and upcountry schools
Level of equality in education comparing the top 200 schools and the bottom 200 schools	100	40	A number close to 100 shows that there is no difference in quality between the best and worst schools
Secondary school enrollment rate (%)	100	78	A 100% enrollment rate means that all children in the age group attend school. Thailand's score of 78 means it is the 94th ranked country in the world

You can come back to this page from any other page by clicking on the 'Criteria' tab at the top of the page, so you don't need to remember everything.

Once the user is satisfied with the projects they have chosen, a report showing the effects of the projects is generated (as shown in the snapshots). For example, choosing the three projects described in the previous paragraph (employing native speaker teachers, setting up a school buddy system, and including essays in national exams) would cost 1.6 billion baht (\$50 million) and have generally positive effects on education, except for lower scores on national exams. Combining the effects on all criteria together, the projects lead to a 5% improvement overall in the effectiveness of English language education.

MinEd Game and teacher training

The primary goals of the MinEd Game project do not concern teacher training. The website aims to raise public awareness of policy issues and to stimulate understanding and discussion of education policy in Thailand with the potential to influence Ministry of Education policy making. Nevertheless, some reactions from users who have contacted me suggest that it could play a useful role in introducing issues of education policy to teacher trainees.

For example, one respondent used the MinEd game as a groupwork activity on a Masters in ELT with groups competing to achieve the best result. In addition to discussing which projects to choose within the group, there was a fruitful discussion of the results focusing on why the projects had the effects they had based on the groups' report forms.

Given the importance of a basic understanding of education policy for teacher trainees and the difficulties of effectively teaching education policy, I hope that the MinEd Game can go beyond its initial goals and serve as a useful resource on teacher training programmes. You and your trainees can try out the MinEd Game at <http://meg.ibankstory.com/>.

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