The Impact of Evaluation on Thai ELT

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Abstract
A recent study found that the university entrance exam is the biggest problem in ELT in Thailand. This paper examines the recent changes in and proposals for the future of the university admissions system, focusing on the effects of the entrance system and the extent to which it achieves its goals. In considering the GPA component of the system, a survey of the evaluation practices at 78 schools is presented. The advantages and disadvantages of past, present and future practices in the university entrance system in Thailand are considered and directions for development identified.

A couple of news reports from China earlier this year have shown the potential of exams to affect students' lives and society in general. In the first, parents have been trying to get hold of Ritalin, an amphetamine-based prescription stimulant, to give their children an edge in the college entrance exams. In the second, parents in one city attempted to get the airport to close over the exam period so that there would be no distracting noise for their children. The situation in Thailand is not as extreme as this, but exams, especially the university entrance exams, have had a major impact on students, teachers and the education system as a whole. In this paper, I intend to examine the effects of exams on Thai education (especially English language education), the reasons behind the use of exams, and directions which could be pursued to make the impact of exams less detrimental.

A brief history of university entrance exams in Thailand
In terms of widest impact on the largest number of students and teachers, the most influential exam in Thailand is the university entrance exam. The general historical pattern for university entrance has been a long period of stability challenged by growing pressure for change which has led to a recent confusing mishmash of unprincipled changes.

The national university entrance exam system started in 1967 using exams consisting exclusively of multiple-choice questions as the sole criterion for selecting candidates for university. The exams to be taken depended on the programme students were applying for, so that for English there was a basic exam for all candidates and an advanced exam for students applying to study English at university. Validity problems, student stress, the growth of tutorial schools, the lack of attention to secondary schooling and a move

towards learner-centredness all combined to put pressure on the entrance exam system so that by the late 1990s changes were inevitable.

The second half of the 1990s was a time of questioning of the status quo of Thai education with pressure for change culminating in the forward-looking National Education Act of 1999 (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999). The act promotes learner-centred education and Section 26 addresses evaluation:

> "Educational institutions shall assess learners' performance through observation of their development; personal conduct; learning behaviour; participation in activities and results of the tests accompanying the teaching-learning process commensurate with the different levels and types of education. Educational institutions shall use a variety of methods for providing opportunities for further education and shall also take into consideration results of the assessment of the learners' performance."

The university entrance exam system did not allow for the use of "a wide variety of methods for providing opportunities for further education" and did not consider learners' development, conduct, behaviour and participation, and thus could not fulfill the requirements of the National Education Act. Indeed, with pressure already building to change the system, efforts to include marks from secondary school performance in addition to exam scores had already come to fruition in 1998. Initially, secondary school scores accounted for only 10% of the overall entrance exam mark with plans to increase this to 70% eventually. These scores in the first year were divided between grade point average (GPA) and percentile ranking to allow for differences in qualities of schools. In the following years, the proportion of the overall mark has increased, albeit more slowly than originally planned, to 30% (and does not look likely to increase further) but the percentile ranking score has been dropped and, instead, a combination of two GPA scores is used – student grade point average focusing on core subjects and cumulative grade point average for all subjects.

In 2006, a further change was made with the traditional entrance exams replaced by other exams with the trendy-sounding names, O-NET (Ordinary National Education Test) and A-NET (Advanced National Education Test). To some extent, this change was cosmetic since O-NET took over from the exams covering the core secondary school courses (maths, science, Thai, English, and social studies) and A-NET replaced the advanced faculty-specific exams. There were, however, three key differences. First, the O-NET exams were more closely linked to the national school curriculum than the previous tests with the aim of forcing students to pay more attention to their school studies. Second, scoring was norm-referenced by converting raw scores into T-scores to control for differences in the levels of difficulty of the various exams. Third, in their first year, the O-NET and A-NET exams included an open-ended section (a short essay in the case of English) in addition to multiple-choice questions. A marking fiasco, however, meant that the open-ended questions were dropped from the 2007 versions which reverted to pure multiple-choice.

The future of the university entrance system
From this brief history, a few interesting points emerge. First, in the last few years, changes in the university entrance system have become the norm to the extent that the system used is different every year. Future plans for the system suggest that stability is a long way away. In 2008, it is planned to add three more core subjects (health, technology, and arts) to the current five being tested through O-NET. The A-NET exam will disappear by 2010 and be replaced by a general aptitude test which will eventually contribute 50% of the overall score. The current two-system GPA for secondary school scores will be simplified by 2010 so that only cumulative GPA is used, but this system will then be complicated by needing to include a score for students' ethics as shown by

their participation in so-called ethical activities (which includes a category of "ethics that demonstrate a student's sacrifice" which can be passed by students donating an organ!) Clearly, the next few years of the Thai university entrance system will be interesting.

The reason behind the constant flux in the entrance system is that several stakeholders with conflicting agendas have a say over the system to be used. The two most powerful stakeholders are probably the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Council of University Rectors (CUR). The decision to include secondary school scores in university entrance originated with the MoE from a desire to motivate students to pay more attention to their secondary school studies. The MoE was also behind the original, but now abandoned, plans to make secondary school scores account for the majority of the overall scores. While the CUR has concurred that scores from secondary schools need to be included, they have attempted to minimise the impact because of worries about the reliability of secondary school scoring. At present, the CUR appear to be winning the power game of imposing agendas on the system, so that secondary school scores will be limited to a maximum of 30% for the foreseeable future. Such conflicting agendas have been the source of many of the recent changes in the entrance system and are unlikely to be resolved soon suggesting that changes are here to stay.

The emphasis on testing and multiple-choice
One reason for abandoning the traditional entrance exams was their total reliance on multiple-choice testing. In 2006, with the inclusion of open-ended items on the exams, it was clear that other item types were an issue. However, the reversion to pure multiple-choice in 2007 (and a debatable justification for this decision by the CUR that multiple-choice could be used to measure students' analytic thinking; see Bunnag, 2006) suggests that O-NET (and the soon-to-be-defunct A-NET and the promised aptitude tests) will continue to be based on multiple-choice.

If the exams cannot allow alternatives to multiple-choice, perhaps the secondary school scores can undertake this role. In addition, secondary school scores can also allow other methods of assessment to be used in addition to exams (as required by the National Education Act).

While it may seem reasonable to hope that the secondary school scores could cater for the need to avoid complete reliance on multiple-choice testing, a recent large-scale survey of secondary school practices for assessing English (Piboonkanarax, forthcoming) suggests that this hope may not be fulfilled. Surveying 78 schools throughout Thailand, it was found that exams (in the form of final exams, mid-term exams and tests) accounted for 60% of marks on average. Other forms of assessment which would fit the requirements of the National Education Act were far less important, with portfolio assessment accounting for only 5% and classroom participation 7%. Moreover, for the exams used, 90% relied largely on multiple-choice items, so that, on average multiple-choice testing is the source of around half of all of the GPA scores from secondary schools used for selection for university placement.

The current situation for university entrance in Thailand, therefore, is one where 70% of marks come from the O-NET and A-NET exams which rely exclusively on multiple-choice and 30% of marks are derived from students' secondary school scores, around half of which are based on multiple-choice. It is also clear that this emphasis on exams and multiple-choice testing is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, even though it has extensive negative impacts on Thai education.

The impacts of the university entrance system
While at first glance it may seem that the impacts of the university entrance system would be limited to students specifically preparing for the test and perhaps the last year

of secondary school, university entrance is so important that its impacts are much wider. The importance of university entrance is best illustrated by the responses of 156 English teachers to a survey of their problems in teaching (Thongsri et al, 2006). Problems identified and rated included the lack of community support for learning English, students' low ability, large class size, extra work, and insufficient teaching aids. Despite the apparent potential seriousness of these problems, the problem rated as most serious by a very wide margin was the influence of the university entrance examination. To see why university entrance is perceived as such a serious problem, we need to investigate how the entrance system has affected other aspects of Thai education.

Washback

Previous work on the impact of testing has looked at washback or "the extent to which a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning" (Messick, 1996 quoted in Brown, 2005). The general negative impacts from washback that have been reported include restricting teaching to only vocabulary and grammar, unnatural teaching, and a reduced emphasis on higher-level thinking (Brown, 1997, 2005). For multiple-choice exams which largely test decontextualised ephemeral memory for facts (Watson Todd, 2007), reported washback effects include the promotion of rote learning of simplistic, non-transferable knowledge, rather than complex skills (Burke, 1999; Forsyth et al., 1999), and encouraging students to be knowledge seekers, rather than understanding seekers (Brown et al., 1997). For English, skills tested through multiple-choice are restricted to receptive skills (and for practical reasons this usually means only reading) so that writing and speaking receive little attention. Similar effects can be found in Thailand.

The emphasis on multiple-choice exams in the university entrance system, and thus their impact, is reinforced by two key factors. First, students tend to focus on grades rather than learning, and therefore exams have a greater impact on students' behaviour. Second, the university entrance system has a major impact on other evaluations conducted in Thai education. This latter point can be seen most clearly when we look at evaluations conducted in 2006, the year when open-ended items were included on O-NET and A-NET exams. These exams take place during the summer break in March to May every year. In the semester following the exams, for the mid-term exams at the end of July, many secondary schools included a brief essay in their English exam, mirroring the previous university entrance exams. In August, the CUR decided to drop the open-ended component from future O-NET and A-NET exams. In the end-of-term exams at schools in September, although there had previously been plans to again include an essay question, several schools reverted to pure multiple-choice following the CUR decision. It can be seen that the format of the university entrance exams affects evaluations conducted in other situations.

With the university entrance system promoting the use of multiple-choice exams, we might expect English teaching in Thailand to focus on rote learning of knowledge about English. This is indeed the case, as a case study from a local university illustrates (Watson Todd, 2003). At this university, for one of the foundation English courses a well-respected textbook is used as the focus of the course. This book covers all four skills and provides a wide range of learning opportunities for students. However, evaluation on the course is derived only from two exams, one in the middle of the term and one at the end, both of which consist of multiple-choice items testing knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. In the first half of the semester, before the mid-term exam, the course follows the textbook closely and students learn a wide range of objectives including extensive speaking and writing. After the mid-term exam when the students realise that knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is all that is needed to pass the course, however, they ask teachers to focus on these points and to spend less time on the unassessed speaking and writing. The teaching and learning in the second half of the

semester, then, limits the range of objectives in the textbook which are covered to those points included in the exam.

While this is an extreme case, it is not atypical. The university entrance exams, mediated through the school exams which copy the format, have been a key factor in bringing about the emphasis on grammatical and lexical knowledge in English language education in Thailand. Worryingly, this emphasis conflicts with the forward-looking educational principles of the National Education Act of 1999 (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999) which are supposed to guide Thai education. It therefore appears that washback from the university entrance exam system on teaching and learning objectives and processes in Thailand has been largely negative.

The impacts on students and society
While washback strictly defined can cover a wide range of impacts of exams, it is often understood to refer primarily to effects on classroom teaching and learning. The impacts of the Thai university entrance exams, however, are far more wide-ranging than this. We have already seen how the entrance system influences other exams, and it also has an impact on students' attitudes and more broadly on society.

The importance of exams as the key determiner of a students' future has led to students' focusing on obtaining good grades at the expense of learning for self-development. This, in turn, has led to cheating becoming more common and more accepted (Bunnag, 2007) and to students concentrating solely on passing exams. The latter point meant that students were paying too little attention to school subjects, which was a key reason behind the decision to include GPA scores in university entrance. Since this decision, students are focusing more on their school studies, but there has also been a rise in cheating at school and there is evidence that students are becoming more selfish and less willing to help their classmates complete school work (Learning Post, 2007). The importance of evaluation in Thai education driven by the university entrance system, therefore, has created an atmosphere of competition at schools with a consequent impact on ethics.

The students' desire to obtain high scores on university entrance has for many years driven the business of tutorial schools which aim to prepare students for the exams, a task made easier by the exclusive use of multiple-choice items. The move to include GPA in entrance scores has had little impact on the business. In terms of classroom teaching and learning, tutorial schools are the institutes exhibiting the greatest washback effects since the exams dictate the curriculum, but there is a more worrying issue. he fact that the reliance on multiple-choice testing means that tutorial schools can be very effective in improving exam scores implies that students who attend tutorial schools have an advantage over those who do not attend. Since the top tutorial schools can be expensive, only students from better-off families can attend, while students from poor backgrounds are not as well-prepared for the university entrance exams. Thus, the emphasis on multiple-choice exams can be seen as promoting inequalities in access to higher education.

Validity and reliability concerns in Thai university entrance
We have seen that the impacts of evaluation in the form of exams, especially the university entrance exams, on Thai education have been wide-ranging from the more obvious impacts on teaching and learning objectives and processes through impacts on other exams and students' attitudes to impacts reinforcing social inequalities. Since most of these impacts are negative, the overall picture is a gloomy one, but, if the exams serve useful purposes well and provide valid and reliable evaluation, their continued use could be justified. We therefore need to examine the validity and reliability of Thai evaluation procedures.

Multiple-choice items are usually favoured for two reasons – practicality and reliability. If exams are needed for university entrance in Thailand, given that several hundred thousand students take the exams at the same time, the practicalities of marking so many papers may be a justification for using multiple-choice items despite their negative washback effects. The fact that a marking fiasco ensued in 2006 after essays were included on the entrance exams reinforces the importance of using multiple-choice for practical reasons. However, many of the 2006 marking problems were not problems of marking essays (for instance, many students who took the exams were marked as absent) and experience of large-scale national testing in other countries, such as the UK, suggests that it is possible to use extensive open-ended questions. Practicality, then, can be seen as an advantage of using multiple-choice testing, but is not in itself a justification.

In addition to being practical, multiple-choice testing is also reliable since marking is objective. This point is, in fact, an argument used by the CUR for limiting the proportions of overall scores given to school-based GPA and for dropping the essay sections in 2006. However, multiple-choice items are only reliable if questions are well-designed. If questions have more than one or no possible answers, scoring is no longer objective. The unfortunate situation in Thai English teaching is that many questions used in multiple-choice exams at schools are poorly designed as the following two items taken from Watson Todd (2003) illustrate.

_____ sports bag do you like?
    a. What
    b. Who
    c. Which
    d. Whose

People swimming here do so his own risk.
    a. Everybody swim here
    b. People swim here because he like risk
    c. People who swim here will have accident
    d. People did not swim here

Poorly designed questions such as these can be found more frequently in school exams than in the university entrance exams. Yet, the latter are not error-free. Every year, five or so questions do not have a single clear correct answer, largely because the questions are based on prescriptions of how English should be used rather than descriptions of actual use. Such problems weaken reliability-based arguments for relying on multiple-choice. More seriously, even if all multiple-choice items are well-designed, their objective reliability is irrelevant if the exams are not valid.

The concept of content validity can be summed up by the dictum 'Test what you teach'. With the traditional university entrance exam, content validity was very low since the content of the exam did not match the secondary school curriculum. The switch to O-NET which is more closely based on the curriculum and the inclusion of GPA scores which come directly from evaluations of achievement of the curriculum objectives should have increased the content validity of the university entrance system. However, since O-NET is pure multiple-choice and school assessment include a fair proportion of multiple-choice, the extent to which the content of the tests matches curriculum objectives is limited. Multiple-choice is either poor or useless at testing higher-level thinking skills and productive skills, both of which are prominent objectives of the secondary school curriculum. Attempts to increase content validity by matching university entrance with the school curriculum have therefore been seriously hindered by the continued reliance on multiple-choice testing.

A second type of validity which should be stressed in university entrance is predictive validity, or the extent to which tests can predict future performance. Starting with research into the predictive validity of the traditional entrance system based purely on exams, Patharakorn (1998) found that high school GPA was a better predictor of university achievement than the entrance exams, giving an additional reason for including the GPA scores in the university entrance system. Following the initial changes to the system, however, Phalavonk and Wangniveitkul (2002) compared the effects of the traditional system and the new system in terms of student dropout at university. They found that significantly more students were dropping out of their university studies under the new system which considered GPA scores. The initial changes made to the system, therefore, did not appear to be particularly effective in selecting appropriate students for university. Worryingly, research conducted at the same time by Churngchow et al. (2002) highlighted the extent to which coaching from tutorial schools influenced examination scores, suggesting the existence of social inequalities in the university entrance system. More recent research into the predictive validity of the entrance system has also cast doubt on the heavy emphasis on exams. Krungsaenmuang and Kaemkate (2007) found that the best predictor of university learning achievement was academic ability at school, while Opaswattana and Jangsiripornpakorn (2007) found that varying the emphases placed on different potential components for university entrance (e.g. core subject GPA, overall GPA, O-NET scores, A-NET scores, school percentile ranking) had little effect on placing candidates in higher education.

A third way of looking at validity issues concerns the extent to which evaluation procedures meet their purposes. A wide range of potential purposes of evaluation have been suggested, including measuring students' learning or ability, measuring the quality of teachers or the curriculum, providing useful feedback to teachers and students, motivating students, diagnosing problems, and placing students (Airasian, 1994; Brown et al., 1997; Hubbard et al., 1983; Miller et al., 1998). The main purpose of the university entrance exams is placing students or performing a gatekeeping function to ration access to further study (Brumfit, 2001), and this is also one purpose of school evaluations where they lead to GPA scores included in the university entrance system. In addition, school evaluations are also meant to measure students' learning of the secondary school curriculum and may motivate students (although such motivation would be extrinsic, rather than the more developmental intrinsic motivation). The extent to which the evaluation procedures meet these purposes concerns predictive validity for the purpose of placement and content validity for the purpose of measuring learning, both of which we have seen are problematic in Thailand.

While the emphasis on multiple-choice testing in Thailand has high practicality, it appears that the evaluation procedures used do not meet their purposes well, and thus validity is low, meaning that issues of reliability are largely moot. It is clear that validity and reliability issues are not enough to justify the continued use of the current evaluation procedures in the face of all the negative washback they produce.

Directions for change to the university entrance system
With a wide range of detrimental impacts and little evidence of its effectiveness in serving its stated purposes, it appears clear that further changes in the university entrance system in Thailand are needed. However, the ways in which these changes are implemented needs careful consideration. From the history of the entrance system, it can be seen that, once the stability of the traditional entrance exams had been challenged, a multitude of inconsistent and largely directionless changes ensued. Many of these changes appear to be knee-jerk reactions to specific problems or driven by the personal agendas of influential people. Given the extent to which the university entrance system affects Thai education, such an approach to change is particularly undesirable.

Rather than giving suggestions for what changes should be made, I would like to suggest guidelines for how changes should be decided on and implemented.

The first consideration is that changes to the entrance system should not be based solely on how well the system performs its gatekeeping function of restricting access to higher education. The potential effects of any proposed changes on other aspects of Thai education should be given at least equal weighting in evaluating whether to implement proposals for change. Given the interrelatedness of the various aspects of education, there is a high chance that a change made purely on the basis of university placement could have serious negative consequences across a broad swathe of Thai education. To avoid this, a systems approach (see Checkland, 1981) to evaluating the potential impacts of changes needs to be taken.

A second principle that should guide decisions for changing the university entrance system concerns the National Education Act (NEA) of 1999 (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999). As we have seen, the reliance on multiple-choice exams conflicts with the guidelines for assessment in the Act, and other methods of assessment should also be used. Doing this could have wide-reaching effects. The NEA is supposedly the key piece of legislation governing Thai education, yet it has had little impact on educational practice, even in the area of educational management where we might expect its effects to be most apparent. The NEA is also a very progressive document which, if implemented fully, would be of great benefit to Thai students (especially sections 23 and 24 which govern the objectives and methods of teaching). Emphasising that major assessment decisions are being guided by the NEA could lead to greater use of the NEA as a guide for decisions made in other areas of education, another example of the impacts of a systems approach.

A third consideration concerns the playoff between validity and reliability. Generally, attempts to increase validity lead to challenges for reliability, and vice versa (Johnson, 2001; Weir, 1990). At present, the CUR is more concerned with reliability than validity, and use reliability problems as the main argument against any further increases in the proportion of entrance scores derived from school GPAs. However, it is more important that the entrance system measures the requisite skills and knowledge needed for higher education than that a few students are placed unfairly. If irrelevant skills and knowledge are measured, it does not matter how reliable these measurements are. Therefore, priority in guiding decisions should be given to validity over reliability. Proposals for changing the entrance system should be evaluated on their predictive validity in placing students appropriately in higher education, their content validity in matching the objectives of the secondary school curriculum, and their learning validity (Tomlinson, 2005) in promoting effective learning. This emphasis on validity does not mean that reliability should be ignored. Rather, measures to increase reliability can be implemented after major decisions have been made based on validity. For instance, if validity concerns mean that a greater proportion of overall entrance scores should be derived from secondary school performance, including percentile ranking in addition to GPA would increase the reliability of the scores.

In short, principled long-term changes to the university entrance system are needed rather than the constant unprincipled flip-flopping of the last few years. Changes should be based on the NEA and validity concerns so that the most appropriate students for higher education are selected. Any changes are likely to have extensive impacts across Thai education, and these impacts may be a more important consideration in decisions about changes than issues of university placement. The importance and influence of university entrance make it both a potential threat to developing Thai education and a potential vehicle for promoting beneficial change. I hope that decisions on future changes to the system take account of the massive impacts it has so that, instead of

being perceived as the biggest problem in education, the university entrance system comes to be seen as the key agent for beneficial development.

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