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National-level educational innovations in Thailand

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This paper examines three types of national-level educational innovations in Thailand from the past twenty years. The first type is legislative or major policy changes regarding education, including the National Education Act of 1999, the development and implementation of educational standards, and large-scale national curriculum reform. The second type concerns those innovations which are personality-led, where influential authorities, such as the Minister of Education, propose their own innovations. This type includes the promotion of brain-based learning, reforms in the core curriculum, and increased testing. Third, in heavily test-centric education systems, such as that of Thailand, changes and innovations in testing can have wide-ranging effects and warrant examination. Looking at a range of national-level innovations of all three types, factors underlying the success or failure of their implementation are identified.

The quality and effectiveness of education, and especially English language education, in Thailand is a source of national concern. Thai students frequently rank low in international educational comparisons, despite Thailand devoting a high proportion of its national budget to education and having progressive national laws concerning education. Each report of a low ranking for the country stimulates a round of soul-searching and generates numerous proposals for improvement. These proposals, however, usually result in little change, perhaps because they do not often account for highly influential context factors such as national-level tests. In this paper, I will examine national-level innovations in Thai education with a particular focus on English language education. I will start by looking at the legislation concerning education, which, in addition to having the potential to stimulate change, also provides the context within which other innovations occur.

National educational legislation in Thailand

Basic education in Thailand covers twelve years of schooling: six years at primary school, three years at lower secondary school, and the final three years either at upper

secondary school or at vocational school. On completion of these twelve years, students are eligible to apply to higher education. Under the current 2007 Constitution (Office of the Council of State, 2007), these twelve years should be free: 'A person shall enjoy an equal right to receive education for the duration of not less than twelve years which shall be provided by State thoroughly, up to the quality, and without charge' (Section 49). Under the Compulsory Education Act of 2003, the first nine of these twelve years are compulsory.

This Constitution also states the Thai government's overall responsibility for education in Section 80: 'developing quality and standard in providing education at all levels and forms to be in line with economic and social changes, preparing the national education plan and the law for national education development, providing development of quality of teachers and educational personnel to meet the current changing in the present day world, and instilling awareness of being Thais, disciplines, common interests and a democratic regime of government with the King as Head of the State to learners'. Reflecting this responsibility to develop education, 24% of the national budget is devoted to education (UNESCO, 2013), the second highest proportion in the world (Fry, 2002). The main 'law for national education development' and 'national education plan' currently applicable are the National Education Act (NEA) of 1999 (amended in 2002) and the National Education Plan (2002-2016).

Prior to the NEA of 1999, the main law concerning education was the 1992 National Scheme of Education (Ministry of Education, 1992) which was founded on four key principles:

1. The flourishing of individual wisdom, thinking, mind and morality
2. Judicious utilization and conservation of natural resources
3. Promotion of Thai language and culture
4. Balance between dependency and self-reliance

These principles focus on the product or content of learning. The NEA of 1999 (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999), however, replaced them with three new key principles which focus on the process of education rather than its product:

1. Lifelong education for all
2. All segments of society to participate in the provision of education
3. Continuous development of the learning process

Section 23 of the NEA identified five key aspects of knowledge that the Thai educational system should promote. One of these is 'Knowledge and skills in mathematics and languages, with emphasis on proper use of the Thai language', suggesting that, although the Thai language is given the highest priority, other languages must also be learnt, although which other languages is not specified.

The NEA also includes a set of progressive, learner-centred approaches that indicate how the aspects of knowledge identified should be put into practice, including 'activities in line with the learners' interests and aptitudes, bearing in mind individual differences', 'activities for learners to draw from authentic experience', 'training in thinking process', and 'the ambiance, environment, instructional media, and facilities for learners to learn

and be all-round persons' (Section 24). The National Education Plan (2002-2016) gives further details of such processes.

While the NEA is fairly general and abstract, clearer and more practical guidance on what should actually happen in schools is provided in the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008). This includes requirements for how time at schools should be used. The categories of subjects for timetabling at primary and secondary schools include 'foreign languages'. Although the curriculum does not specifically state that English should be taught, in practice English is the default foreign language and has been since 1921 when its teaching was first made compulsory in theory, if not in practice (Methitham and Chamcharatsri, 2011). In the 2008 Curriculum, class time devoted to the teaching of foreign languages should be 40 hours per year in the first three years of primary education, 80 hours per year in the last three primary years, 120 hours per year in lower secondary, and 60 hours per year in upper secondary. For upper secondary schooling, about half of the whole amount of time available for teaching is left open to allow schools individual flexibility in organising learning, which normally means that a much greater number of hours than the minimum required is devoted to English teaching.

With so much time available for teaching English, what should be taught? The objectives to be covered in Thai education are given in the National Education Standards (Ministry of Education, 2001a). Unlike the NEA and the Curriculum, the Standards include specifications of the content of English teaching. These include:

- 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)

With the exception of the focus on native speaker culture in Substance 2, these are uncontroversial if somewhat broad. To specify the content of teaching more clearly, the Ministry of Education (2001b, 2010) provides a list of recommended textbooks for schools to use. Most of the books focus on teaching grammar, provide trivial content based largely on British or American culture, and assess proficiency through closed-ended exercises. Generally, the content of these textbooks does not match the objectives and methodologies of the NEA and Standards (Watson Todd and Keyuravong, 2004).

Despite the mismatch between the textbooks and the policies, overall it seems that the legislation provides a reasonable environment for effective English language teaching in

Thailand. Together with the substantial government budget devoted to education, the policy context bodes well for English education and learning. Evaluations of the results of education, however, are less rosy.

Evaluations of the effectiveness of Thai education

Every so often, a range of international organisations produce ratings of countries including ratings of the quality of education often in the form of ranking comparisons with other countries. More rarely, other organisations produce ratings of national-level proficiency in English. And annually there are internal ratings of educational quality. These three sources allow us to judge whether the potentially beneficial legislative and policy environment in Thailand leads to effective education.

Five of the major quality ratings of education in general are summarised in Table 2.1. Since the number of countries assessed varies (the lowest is 40 countries for EIU, the highest is 148 countries for WEF), I have converted these ranking scores into normalised rankings (ranging from 0 to 1 with 1 being the best ranked) to allow comparison between assessments.

Table 2.1 International rankings of Thai education

<i>Ranking organisation</i>	<i>Aspects rated</i>	<i>Normalized ranking</i>
International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (2012)	Maths and science at primary levels	0.35
	Maths and science at secondary levels	0.39
International Institute for Management Development (2010)	Overall education performance	0.19
	Primary education quality	0.31
	Secondary education quality	0.09
Programme for International Student Assessment (2012)	Reading	0.27
	Maths	0.23
	Science	0.28
Economist Intelligence Unit (2012)	Overall education quality	0.08
World Economic Forum (2013)	Primary education quality	0.42
	Educational system quality	0.48

From Table 1, we can see that in all the assessments on all aspects, Thailand falls in the bottom half of countries. Given that the assessments tend to include developed countries more than developing countries, this is perhaps not surprising. Both popular and official reactions to these assessments usually involve restricting the comparison to within the ten countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). In these regional comparisons, Thailand usually comes bottom or second-to-bottom of the seven or eight ASEAN countries included in most of the assessments, leading to much hand-wringing and numerous calls for reform which I will look at more closely in the next section.

The international assessments in Table 1 focus on education in general. Another set of international assessments attempts to gauge the general level of English proficiency in

various countries, assessments from which we might infer the quality of English language teaching in Thailand.

The first of these English language assessments is the ETS report of average TOEFL® scores by country. In the most recent 2013 report, Thailand ranked 114th of 162 countries for the iBT (a normalized ranking of 0.31) and 52nd of 58 countries for the paper-based test (a normalized ranking of 0.11). Although these scores are not representative of the whole population since only a small proportion of nationals take the TOEFL® test, they present a worrying picture. This is confirmed by the Education First ratings of English proficiency based on their own tests (Education First, 2013). On this assessment, Thailand was rated at the lowest of five proficiency ratings (Very Low Proficiency) and ranked 55th of 60 countries (a normalized ranking of 0.08). A third assessment is JobStreet.com English Language Assessment of white-collar employees (The Nation, 2013). Of the five ASEAN countries assessed, Thailand came last. Although all of these ratings are problematic, taken together they suggest that English language proficiency levels in Thailand, and by inference the quality of English language teaching, are low.

Internal quality assurance exercises also suggest that the promising policy environment does not lead to quality education. In 2012, 2,295 schools out of 7,985 assessed failed to meet required standards (Intathep, 2012), and for 2013, the figures were 768 of 2,038 assessed schools failing (Intathep, 2014a). Perhaps most worryingly, the average score on the English language section of the university entrance exam in 2011 was just 19.22% - a dismal score for a test which consists of four-option multiple-choice items.

Projects to solve educational quality problems

The publication of reports assessing educational quality inevitably lead to calls for reform. In some cases, these are very general: in response to the PISA scores in 2012, the Minister of Education said, 'The education system must be developed as a whole'. In other cases, proposals for change appear to target score improvement without considering educational quality: again in response to the PISA scores, an influential educational advisor was quoted as saying, 'The central examination systems should be designed to conform to PISA' (Intathep, 2013a). Most interestingly for the purposes of this article, some official or influential responses concern innovations or projects directly intended to address educational quality problems. In response to the WEF ratings, the former ASEAN secretary-general proposed that the Thai educational system needed to place a much greater emphasis on the teaching of English, while a deputy prime minister argued that the curriculum needed to be overhauled (Bangkok Post, 2013). In response to schools failing quality assurance, the QA agency allocated a budget for additional school supplies for failing schools and the head of the agency argued that more funds for research needed to be made available to improve educational quality at universities (Intathep, 2012). A final influence is that authorities sometimes look to high-ranking countries for inspiration in addressing problems. In response to the PISA evaluation, suggestions were made that Thai education should learn from Finland or South Korea, two high-scoring countries.

While not all of these knee-jerk reactions to reports of educational quality problems come to fruition, one notable feature of Thai education is the large number of well-intended, if

not effective, large-scale projects being conducted at any one time with the goal of improving educational quality. For instance, in 2000 Thai secondary school teachers were required to fulfill several different requirements as parts of educational reform projects. They needed to make education child-centred, encourage creativity, promote critical and analytic thinking, help students learn experientially, teach through a seminar approach, and keep portfolios of their work. At the same time, schools were told that they would operate only four days a week, that different subjects in the curriculum would be integrated, that elective courses based on the needs of the local communities should be created, and that national assessment exams would be conducted every three years (Watson Todd, 2010). Similarly, in a report for the Asian Development Bank, Atagi (2002) identified eleven different major projects being run by various agencies with some conflict between projects and no agency given overall control. Such a multiplicity of projects is problematic, since ‘the main problem in public education is not resistance to change, but the presence of too many innovations mandated or adopted uncritically and superficially on an *ad hoc* fragmented basis’ (Fullan, 1993: 23).

It is not only the number of projects being implemented simultaneously that is problematic. The ways in which they are implemented may also be a source of failure. To illustrate this, I will briefly examine three specific national-level innovations, namely, the promotion of brain-based learning, current efforts to reform the core curriculum, and current proposals for increased testing.

Brain-based learning, a somewhat controversial set of theories and practices linking findings from neurology to education, became popular in 2005 as the idea was heavily promoted by the new Minister of Education with support from the Prime Minister. A National Institute for Brain-based Learning with an initial budget of 340 million baht (11 million US dollars) was set up, gift bags to promote learning were created and distributed to parents of newborns, and a brain-based curriculum was designed and piloted at six primary schools (Watson Todd, 2005). This piloting was imposed on the schools with Institute staff deciding to ‘throw out’ all existing learning materials. Even before the results of the pilot study were in, plans were afoot to expand the brain-based curriculum to all schools nationwide. Before this could be done, however, the Minister of Education changed and the project was dropped in favour of the new Minister’s pet projects, although the Institute continued in a moribund state with a reduced budget.

The current core curriculum guiding school-level education is the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2008) which took six years to develop. In 2013, it was decided by the Minister of Education that a new curriculum was needed and the reform process started with the goal of creating a new curriculum in six months. In an unusual move for Thailand, the Minister of Education was replaced, yet the new Minister decided to continue to push for a new curriculum with no change of timeframe (Intatthep, 2013b). The short timeframe for reform means that there will be few opportunities for consultation or public participation with the curriculum largely imposed on its users. There are also conflicts between the proposed curriculum and other Ministry projects. One key feature of the proposed curriculum is a reduction in classroom time with a concomitant increase in outside class learning. At the same time, the Education Ministry

is pushing to reduce the amount of homework required with no clear plans for increased outdoor learning activities (Intathep and Ngoh, 2013).

The Thai education system is heavily testcentric (Watson Todd and Shih, 2013). Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education has recently proposed a major increase in the number of national-level tests. Currently, there are national tests after every three years of schooling with other assessments under the control of individual teachers and schools. Under the proposal, the teacher-designed summative exams at the end of courses would be replaced by national exams. This change, if implemented, would clearly conflict with the requirements of the NEA for education to be decentralised, but also reflects a greater problem, namely, the impact of tests on education, which can be viewed as underlying much of the poor performance of the Thai educational system.

The impact of tests on Thai education

In Thailand, all national tests and the majority of the current teacher-designed assessments at schools rely on multiple-choice testing (Piboonkanarax, 2007). Such a situation is likely to have a large impact on the teaching-learning process, a phenomenon known as washback (Brown, 1997). The impacts of tests take three forms.

First, certain key national-level tests exert a large influence on other tests. Perhaps the most influential test in Thailand is the national university entrance exam. From its initiation in 1967, the entrance exam has consisted solely of multiple-choice items with the single exception of the exam in 2006. In that year 10% of marks were given to an open-ended question, in the case of English an essay item. Following this, schools which had previously used pure multiple-choice exams now decided to include an open-ended item. The 2006 entrance exam, however, resulted in a marking fiasco and the open-ended item was hastily dropped. The schools which had changed their own exams then reverted back to pure multiple-choice (Watson Todd, 2008).

Second, the reliance on multiple-choice testing has major impacts on teaching. A survey of Thai secondary school English teachers found that the influence of the university entrance exam was rated as the most serious problem they faced, ahead of students' low proficiency, large class sizes and excessive workload (Thongsri, Charumanee and Chatupote, 2006). Perhaps because of this, in a study of Thai teachers' practices, Fitzpatrick (2011) found that teachers devoted much of the classtime in the final year of secondary school to looking at past exam questions and taking reading comprehension tests. Such exercises mean that English language learning becomes an exercise in memorising language knowledge.

Third, the importance of test results leads students to concentrate solely on passing exams rather than learning for self-development. This, in turn, means that cheating becomes more common and more accepted (Bunnag, 2007).

These washback impacts of national-level tests mean that many of the stated goals of education are ignored. The NEA is founded on the educational ideology of learner centredness with the overall goal of education being helping learners to reach their full

potential in life (Watson Todd, 2011). This led to numerous policies and projects to promote child-centred learning. In most cases, the move to child-centred learning was a failure with teacher-dominated lessons remaining the norm (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Kantamara, Hallinger and Jatiket, 2006). There may be several reasons behind these failures. They may be due to the innovation being an imported Western concept inappropriate to the local context (Pookcharoen, 2009); they may be due to incompetent management of innovation by the Ministry of Education (Watson Todd, 2000); or they may be due to the mismatch between child-centred learning and standardised multiple-choice tests. If the last is true, the current proposal to increase the number of national-level multiple-choice tests does not bode well.

The causes of the problems and directions for the future

Generally, national-level innovations in Thailand have not been successful. Despite some rhetoric espousing successes, in most schools in Thailand teaching and learning today is little different from forty years ago with the exception of the integration of technology. To some extent, this is surprising given the potential benefits of the legislative and policy environment. There appear to be four key reasons behind this failure to turn the positive legislative environment into beneficial teaching practices.

The first issue is the sheer number and transience of national-level innovations. We have seen that a key report on Thai education (Atagi, 2002) identified the large number of uncoordinated projects being conducted at any one time as a major problem. This is exacerbated by the fact that many of these projects are not followed through to completion, especially for projects, such as brain-based learning, which are associated with a particular Minister of Education. When the Minister changes, the project loses impetus and even funding. Unfortunately, most Ministers of Education in Thailand do not last long - there were four different Ministers in the calendar year 2008, and there have been nine different Ministers in the past six years. One result of this transience of projects is that schools and teachers have very little inducement to devote time and energy to any particular project since it is unlikely to last for very long.

The second issue is the appropriacy of the national-level innovations. Most of these are borrowed from the educational experiences of other countries. While learning from the success of others seems sensible, as we have seen with the Western-sourced child-centred learning, there is a question of transferability across cultures. Similarly in English language teaching, there have been numerous arguments about the applicability of the Western-sourced Communicative Language Teaching to Asian countries such as Thailand (e.g. Andrewes, 2005; Li, 1998). However, as we saw, the poor ranking of Thailand on PISA scores led to suggestions that Thai education could learn from successful countries such as Finland and South Korea. Indeed, the Ministry of Education organised a study tour to Finland to identify potential beneficial practices that could be implemented in Thailand. This ignores the fact that Finland has one of the latest school starting ages in the world, a feature that conflicts with Thai parents' desires that their children start education as early as possible. Transferring many of the practices from Finland to Thailand, then, is unlikely to lead to successful innovations.

The third issue is how the national-level innovations are implemented. The most common approach is that the innovation is imposed from the top down onto schools. This shows a lack of concern for the actual implementers of the innovations, also reflected in the tight timeframe for implementing the proposed new core curriculum which allows little public participation, and reduces the chances of the implementation being successful. An investigation of the impacts of policy on practice in Thai schools suggests that there is very little coherence in the implementation and that the legislative environment has a greater impact on practice than the national-level innovation projects that are imposed on the schools (Darasawang and Watson Todd, 2012). The alternative to top-down imposition is bottom-up diffusion, and there is some evidence that educational innovations in Thailand that take this approach are more likely to succeed, such as the Integrated Pest Management curriculum that started from a single teacher's initiative (see Kantamara et al., 2006).

The final issue is the overwhelming influence of multiple-choice testing on Thai education. The multiple-choice tests in Thailand promote rote learning of simplistic, non-transferable knowledge (Watson Todd, 2008). This means that innovations which promote complex skills or personal development are unlikely to be successful as students, parents and teachers give priority to test scores over learning.

For national-level innovations to lead to learning benefits, these issues need to be addressed. The Ministry of Education needs to implement a more coherent, longer-term vision of innovation with fewer projects proposed, and with a proportion of those projects originating in the grassroots of Thai education. Where innovations are imported, looking to countries with similar cultures is more likely to successful implementation. Most importantly, assessment practices need to change to reduce the reliance on multiple-choice testing and to allow potentially beneficial innovations a chance of being successful.

A very recent proposal addressing the issue of assessment practices gives some hope for Thai education. Particularly focusing on English language assessment, the Minister of Education proposed that testing should be based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR (Intathep, 2014b). Given that this framework includes descriptors of the four skills in some detail (see Council of Europe, 2014), if taken seriously only a small proportion of the competencies covered in the framework are testable through multiple-choice items. Although the CEFR originates in Europe and thus may be an inappropriate innovation to adopt given the cultural differences between Thailand and Europe, the framework has been successfully adopted in non-European countries such as Colombia and the Philippines, countries from whose experience Thailand could usefully learn. The implementation of the CEFR may lead to a broadening of the assessment practices used to evaluate English language to include measures of actual speaking and writing in addition to the currently tested reading and linguistic knowledge. The experiences with the university entrance exam in 2006 when the inclusion of an essay item led to a marking fiasco, however, suggests that changes in assessment practices will not be trouble-free. Again, however, learning from countries with similar cultures may enable a second marking fiasco to be avoided. The Malaysian

University Entrance Exam, for instance, has been successfully run for many years and includes individual oral presentations, group discussions, and summary and essay writing (Malaysian Examination Council, 1999), and the Thai examination authorities could usefully learn from their Malaysian counterparts about how to organise large-scale open-ended assessments.

Despite its beneficial policy environment, the Thai education system performs relatively poorly with badly managed innovation projects and a testcentric educational culture perhaps being behind this poor performance. Although the current situation is gloomy, proposals such as the use of the CEFR as the basis for English language assessment, if implemented properly with guidance from the experience of similar countries, could lead to a more promising future for Thai education.

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