

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

: Success or Failure ?



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Most people, of course, speak only one language (mother tongue); and Japanese people, in particular are notoriously monolingual. Living in the world and speaking just one language is rather like living in an enormous palace and staying in only one room all of the time. Learning other languages is like exploring the other rooms of the palace. All languages have some things in common. Firstly, they all have the same main purpose.

People speak or write to each other, of course, to give each other various kinds of information, in other words, to communicate or send messages. Secondly, all languages when they are spoken are made by the same organs such as lungs, vocal cords, tongue, lips, and so on.

Language is a means of communication. In the globalized world, there is, to be sure, a tradition, that an educated person should know at least one foreign language

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(even English native speakers). There are three main reasons for learning a foreign language : (1) as a means to a cultural end; (2) as a means to a utilitarian end, like passing an examination or negotiating a contract; and, (3) as a means in itself, because of an interest in languages. Each of these three reasons may contribute in varying measure to a learner's motivation to learn a foreign language.

The goal for foreign language instruction is varied because the socio-economic, political and educational climate of the country has changed from one era to the next. The status of foreign languages, especially English, has earned a prominent place in the Thai curriculum at various levels. The study of the English language in Thailand has normally been taken up in primary schools at Prathom 5. Other foreign languages such as French, German, Japanese have also been taught in secondary schools.

At present, there is a concensus that the communicative approach commonly employed in

schools and colleges is suitable for foreign languages classes. According to this approach, it is generally assumed that learners must start with understanding and speaking rather than with reading and writing. However, Thai learners are generally very shy and lack motivation as mentioned above. Moreover, they are neither encouraged nor fortunate to be engaged in activities outside the classroom via foreign languages if and when opportunities arise.

The problems of foreign language teaching appear to be multiple: poor teaching (often the result of inadequate preparation of teachers for the task); lack of supervision and expert advice; absence of agreed objectives or a planned program; uncertainties of teaching methods; shortage of adequate materials; lack of understanding among administrators for the problems of foreign language teaching; and, most important of all, the large size of foreign languages classes.

The future of foreign language teaching in Thailand will

depend on whether we can overcome weakness and solve such problems. The one remaining important variable in the learning situation is the teacher himself. His potential and his skills are instrumental in creating the conditions for learners. His skill depends on two factors, his own proficiency in that language and his knowledge of methods and techniques of teaching. The foreign language proficiency of teachers cannot be taken for granted. In Thailand, plenty of teachers never have the opportunity to visit the country where the language they teach is spoken. A teacher who has difficulty himself in speaking the

language he teaches is not going to succeed in giving his students a command of spoken language.

Several approaches have been tried to meet the demand for efficient foreign language teaching. They include television teaching, films, provision of tape and disc recordings, CAI, self-instruction, books and a combination of several of these possibilities. The underlying demand in deciding which of the measures to use is to train qualified teachers to teach foreign languages by means of in-service training or taking a specific course in the foreign language speaking countries.

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