

English Language Education : Thai Perspectives

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This paper traces the developments of Thailand's language policies by highlighting the language policy stipulated in the Eighth National Education Development Plans: 1997-2001. The Plans acknowledge the significance of the information superhighway and the role of information technology in education and adopt the concept of the globalisation of education. Foreign languages, particularly English, will play a significant role in serving the emerging needs of the new society and the new generation of students. In this paper, the need for more foreign language learning, especially in English, is presented in the light of the present curriculum reflecting social demand for the language. To provide academic background for the practice, the research findings of a study on factors in the English language abilities of Thai students are discussed.

This paper will be in five parts as follows:

Part One : Development of Thailand's language policies, highlighting the language policy

stipulated in the Eighth National Education Development Plans (1997-2001)

Part Two : The role of English in serving the emerging needs of the new society and the new generation of students

Part Three : The 1996 English curriculum revisited

Part Four : Academic and social underpinnings for the implementation of the curriculum

Part Five : Practical outlook for today's students and classrooms

The details will be discussed as follows :

Part One : Development of Thailand's language policies highlighting the language policy stipulated in the Eighth National Education Development Plans (1997-2001)

National language policy in the past has tended to lay great emphasis on the study of the national language. In 1975, the government allowed the study of Thai in the lower primary level of education, and foreign languages became elective in

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the upper primary level. Later, in 1977, the Ministry of Education passed a decree abolishing foreign language learning in primary education and making all foreign languages elective in the secondary level. However, parents and teachers widely opposed it, and many private schools continued teaching English in the primary level. This forced the Ministry of Education to revise the curriculum by having English as an extracurricular subject. In 1978, the Ministry of Education allowed five hours of English in the curriculum for grades 5 and 6, and not more than five hours of English for students in grades 1 to 4 in private schools. For the lower secondary level of education, all foreign languages were regarded equally, and students could choose to study one foreign language; in almost all cases English was chosen. For the upper secondary level, students could choose to study two foreign languages as provided in the Ministry's curriculum.

Demands for the study of foreign modern languages have been increasing since the economic boom of the 1980's. This has created a demand for individuals who are not only qualified in their chosen area of professional expertise, but who also can communicate with their foreign colleagues or customers orally and in writing with a reasonable degree of fluency. Thus, in 1988, private schools were allowed to offer French, German, and Japanese in addition to English. Government schools were also urged to include other foreign languages besides English in the school subjects. In 1992, the government allowed the teaching and learning of all foreign languages in accordance with the Ministry's general education

curriculum. English has become more than just a tool to gain access to modern technology. It has become the key to professional advancement as well.

English is recognized as the most widely used international language for both academic and occupational purposes. Students may choose to learn English as early as grade 5. English used to be compulsory from grade 5 to university before the implementation of the 1978 curriculum, which offers it as an elective subject beginning in the first year of secondary education (or Matayom 1, which is equivalent to grade 7). Social needs for English later motivated the Ministry of Education to move it back to grade 5 again, while maintaining its elective subject status. This directive is for government schools only. Private schools can begin English earlier. Many missionary schools begin English in grade 1 or even earlier. The university demonstration schools begin English in grade 3. As mentioned in the section on Policy on Language in Education, for the 1996 curriculum, English starts in grade 1 as a compulsory subject.

The Eighth National Education Development Plans: 1997-2001 comments on the insufficient time for foreign language curriculum. The need for more hours of English has become apparent. For the 1996 English curriculum, English is compulsory from grade 1 onwards. The purpose of this curriculum is to provide Thai students with the opportunity to continue their English learning from primary to secondary education without interruption.

Within the present curriculum, there are currently nine languages being taught. They are

Thai, English, Japanese, French, German, Chinese, Pali, Sanskrit and Arab. However, not many schools can offer students these languages, with the exception of English, because the schools are seriously lacking language teachers. Therefore, only English is taught in most language classes at all class levels. Approximately 80% to 95% of schools teach English in primary classes for 6-15 periods of 20 minutes per week. At the secondary level of education, it is taught for 4-6 periods of 50 minutes per week.

Part Two : The role of English in serving the emerging needs of the new society and the new generation of students

The Eighth National Education Development Plan (1996-2001) acknowledges the significance of the information superhighway and the role of information technology in education and adopts the concept of the globalisation of education (p. 7). Foreign languages, particularly English, will play a significant role in serving the emerging needs of the new society and the new generation of students. At the moment, English is the most popular foreign language taught in schools and used in the media. In their study, Wongsothorn and others (1996 : 39-46) discovered 14 TV channels broadcasting in English nationally and internationally to approximately 700,000 viewers in the country. As for readership, approximately 670,000 people were registered as reading English newspapers and magazines, while approximately 310,000 persons read 12 Chinese newspapers and magazines. Compared with the number of people using English and Chinese, the number of those using Japanese and German was relatively very

low. Concerning television broadcasting in foreign languages, the study found language teaching and news, as well as documentaries. Eight IBC Cable TV and Thai Sky Cable TV channels were registered as broadcasting their programmes in foreign languages. These programmes included entertainment, sports, and news, as well as documentaries. The study discovered English being broadcast for 336.5 hours per day and holding the largest proportion when compared with those of French (.25 hour), Japanese (2 hours) and German (.25 hour). Of the national broadcast, 5% was devoted to teaching, (mostly through Channel 11), and another 10% to other educational purposes. However, for international broadcast, 85% was allocated to entertainment purposes, while only 10% was allocated to other educational purposes. The amount of broadcasting time devoted to teaching French and German was very small. Only 50% of a quarter hour per day was allocated for such a purpose in both cases. Regarding Japanese, of the two hours of broadcasting per day. The study found 50% devoted to educational purposes, but not directly to teaching Japanese, and the other 50% allocated to news and entertainment.

In regard to trading, the study indicated that the ten countries with whom Thailand has the most contacts in terms of total trade in goods and services, in rank order, are USA, Japan, Singapore, Germany, Malaysia, UK, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, France and Italy. The volumes of trade in terms of GNP ranged from 9.02 to 0.75 and the percentages of total trade ranged from 21.49 to 1.79 between January and October 1994. Very interestingly, English was found to be the most

commonly used language in business transactions in both written and spoken modes. In some circumstances, Japanese, Malay, Chinese, German, French and Dutch were also used in both written and spoken modes in business transactions. However, these languages were not used as much or as significantly as English.

Regarding tourism, it was discovered that in 1995 the ten countries most frequently visited by Thai tourists, when rank-ordered by their expenditure, were Switzerland, France, England, Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, Korea, USA, Singapore and Malaysia. The language commonly used in the ten countries English. French, German, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean were also used in some circumstances, but not much. For incoming tourism it was discovered that in 1995 tourists from the ten countries that most frequently visited Thailand rank-ordered according to their expenditure were Japan, Germany, Taiwan, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, China, Singapore, the USA, France and Korea. The Languages of communication were Japanese, English, German, Chinese, French, Malay and Korean.

To be responsive to the ever-changing demands of foreign language usage, especially of English, Thai education agencies at all levels, as well as every individual concerned with language education, should consider the academic, professional, social and personal requirements of present-day students in their planning, policy-making, implementation, and in merging the international needs with the national and individual needs. Pragmatic orientation emphasizing the reality of the situational backdrop, the practicality of teaching and learning

methods and techniques, as well as the needs and readiness of the students, are to be adopted for language curriculum development.

Part Three : The 1996 English Curriculum revisited

At all levels, the curriculum of English is designed to be flexible and wider in scope in order to accommodate students of different levels of ability and goals. They are terminal at each level, but also serve those who wish to continue in higher education.

Primary Education

The curriculum of this level aims to enable students to develop skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing English necessary for communication pertaining to their age level. A positive attitude towards English as an international language, including a love of reading and learning habits, is encouraged. The English curriculum for this level belongs to the "special experience" subject cluster of the beginner level. This level of English is aimed to provide students with adequate basic skills in English in order to prepare them for secondary education. At the primary level, the curriculum is geared towards usage; the emphasis is on oral skill and elementary understanding of simple English for everyday use, e.g. household commodities, merchandise such as food, medicine, household chemicals, etc.

Lower Secondary Level

The objectives of the foreign languages curriculum at this are as follows:

1. to enable students to communicate in English in various situations correctly and appropriately in view of the cultures of those who use English as the mother tongue

2. to be able to communicate in English by listening, speaking, reading and writing accurately and appropriately according to the level of learning

3. to be able to use English for further education and for career

4. to develop students' attitudes towards learning English by making them realize the usefulness and values of English, and by implanting inquiring habits through the medium of English

(The 1996 English Curriculum, p.35)

The emphasis is on structure and the application of English to basic communication skills. The medium of instruction is both English and Thai. Depending on the complexity of content and the fluency of both teachers and students. There is a wide range of textbooks on communication skills from which teachers may select.

Upper Secondary level

The following are the objectives for the curriculum of foreign languages for the upper secondary level :

1. to enable students to communicate in English in various situations correctly and appropriately in view of the cultures of those who use English as the mother tongue

2. to be able to communicate in English by listening, speaking, reading and writing accu-

rately and appropriately according to the level of learning

3. to gain knowledge and understanding of the cultures of the speakers of English as well as the ability to use English to understand the various cultures and to transfer Thai culture to the English speaking societies

4. to be able to use English for further education and career

5. to develop students' attitudes towards learning English by making them realize the usefulness and values of English, and by implanting inquiring habits through the medium of English. (The 1996 English Curriculum, p. 38)

At the upper secondary level, the levels of instructional materials range from intermediate to fairly advanced. This is to cater to various needs and abilities of students. Assignments and exercises in the texts cover the four skills. More oral exercises in the form of questions and answers and grammar drills, role plays, pair work and group work are included, especially in the English Skill Development courses.

The instructional materials are mainly obtained from commercial sources and have been screened and approved by a committee consisting of experts, teachers, and linguists appointed by the Ministry of Education.

The 1996 English curriculum also encourages students who are good in English or have the aptitude in the language to take an intensive English program which is offered as a free elective at both the lower and the upper secondary levels.

Tertiary Level of Education

The Office of University Affairs specifies that all universities offer at least six credits of language as part of general education. Beyond this, each institution draws up its own syllabus and selects its own materials. Thai, English and other foreign languages are offered in universities, the Institute of Technology, Teacher Training Colleges, and private colleges. On average English is the most popular foreign language at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels. English is offered as part of a liberal education, as a major, as a minor and as an elective. Generally, students at this level take general English in the first year and take English for academic purposes in the second and third years.

The instructional materials are mainly developed by contract teachers who are native speakers of English and by Thai instructors. The most preferred method of instruction is ability grouping, peer tutoring and self study. Lecturing and tutoring are also widely used. Objectives testing, essay writing, and oral interviews are common assessment techniques. Self-directed learning and methods of enquiry are also favored at this level of education. Most universities have set up language resource or self-access language learning centers for students to acquire language skills and knowledge on their own and/or with teachers' consultancy as necessary.

Part Four : Academic and social underpinnings for the implementation of the curriculum

To implement the curriculum reliable and valid information derived from research, criti-

cal and sound reflective thinking is needed since there is no ready-made solution or streamlined know-how practices. Sensitivity and flexibility are the cornerstone of implementation. Sound, principle-based eclecticism is practised at all levels and academic endeavours to best fit the students as individuals and to best suit the demands from outside. Here globalisation and localisation are juxtaposed, not as paradoxical variables but as supplementing agents for curriculum building and syllabus design.

Academic underpinnings

Spolsky (1989:80 in J. H. A. L. de Jong and D. K. Stevenson, 1990:5) put forth the combination of analytical and synthetical views of knowing a language as follows;

The criteria for "knowing a language" are specifiable:

1. as underlying knowledge or skills (dual knowledge condition) ; (unanalyzed knowledge condition)
2. analyzed or unanalyzed (analyzed knowledge condition); (unanalyzed knowledge condition)
3. implicit or explicit (implicit/explicit knowledge condition) of individual structural items (sounds, lexical items, grammatical structures) (discrete item condition)
4. which integrate into larger units (language as system condition)
5. such as functional skills (integrated function condition)
6. for specified purposes (see, for instance, academic skills condition, communicative goal condition);

7. or as overall proficiency (overall proficiency condition)

8. productive or receptive (productive/receptive skills condition)

9. with a specified degree of accuracy (variability condition; accuracy condition)

10. with a specified degree of fluency (automaticity condition)

11. and with a specified approximation to native speaker usage (native speaker target condition)

12. of one or more specified varieties of language (specific variety condition)

Spolsky's pragmatic view of language acquisition is both behaviouristic and cognitivist. Incorporating both discrete language components and their manifestation in language uses through productive and receptive language skills, it confirms Sinclair's (1991) two principles of language organisation, namely the open choice principle and the idiom principle. The former refers to the "slot and filler" model (p. 109), which describes texts as a series of slots to be filled by contextually suitable words. Sinclair states that each slot "virtually any word can occur". This model deems language as operational simultaneously on different levels and that a very complex pattern of alternatives is possible at any moment. The latter refers to the "idiom principle" model, which views that a language has a command of a large number of "semi-preconstructed phrases" that form individual choices. Willis (1997) reiterates this point by referring to Widdowson's (1989) words about phrases in specialised discourse as not only an important part

of texts, but also as the basic factor of communicative competence. Willis concludes that phrases are to be included in planning both specialised and general English programmes of learning which should take into account both the principle of choices and the principle of idiom.

Bachman (1990:107) concludes that communicative language ability is composed of both knowledge of language and the capacity of utilizing that knowledge in communicative language use. He further concludes that language competence includes organisational competence consisting of grammatical and textual competence, and pragmatic competence which consists of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Bachman's framework regards psycho-physiological mechanisms as essentially the neurological and physiological processes in language use. This enables researchers to differentiate literacy from oracy and productive modes from receptive modes of language skills.

Wongsothorn (1993) conducted a government funded research on the factors in English abilities of Thai students in these three levels of education : lower secondary, upper secondary and university. Principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was used to discover the traits or factors that constitute English language abilities of Thai students in these three levels of education. Research findings revealed that for lower secondary or Mathayomsuka-three, students' oracy skills were prominent at the ratio of 3:1 with literacy. Grammar and vocabulary were grouped with literacy skills. This can imply that learning of these two language components can be done through

literacy while sound discrimination, another language component, which manifests sensitivity for oral cues, a feature of fluency, is markedly grouped with oracy skills. For upper secondary or Mathayom Suksa six students, the division of language abilities was in two factors of oracy and literacy. It is interesting to note that while grammar is under oracy, vocabulary is under literacy. This may shed some light on the nature of language acquisition at this upper intermediate level of education, where Thai students may learn the rules of language better through speaking and listening while their vocabulary building may be done more effectively in reading and writing. At the university level, literacy was more prominent at the ratio of 2:1 with oracy. This may point to some major routes in curriculum development for this level of education, as both specific and general English courses are geared towards academic and professional purposes for the future work force to serve the needs of the Thai society. This of course does not imply that oracy is not important. The question is whether oracy is as crucial to the requirements of the Thai society as it embarks upon and progresses towards globalisation. The needs for oracy should be scrutinized from the perspective of individual needs, wants and social uses. It should also be noted that grammar and vocabulary, which are the nuts and bolts of language, are grouped together under literacy. The claim is that the practice of these two language components by university students can very well be carried out through literacy skills.

It can be concluded that the factors in English communicative proficiency differ among the three levels of education. Factor groupings for

lower secondary students consist of three factor groupings in oracy and one literacy factor. On the other hand, the analysis for the upper secondary students yield two factor groupings, one for oracy and the other for literacy. Interestingly, the findings involving the university students indicate two factor groupings for literacy and one factor grouping for oracy. Communicative proficiency profiles for English language students at the three levels of education with respect to the factor groupings can be established for effective curriculum design. It can be inferred from the research results that for lower secondary students, emphasis should be placed on the acquisition and production of oracy or listening and speaking in both unitary and integrative modes. The learning, teaching and practice of the oral-aural skills are important and conducive to success in language learning and language use. For upper secondary students, both oracy and graphic modality should have equal weighting as students at this level need to acquire and employ both modalities for everyday use and for academic purposes of furthering their education. For university English curriculum in general, literacy seems to need a greater emphasis than oracy. Profiles of Thai students' language abilities as revealed by this research may shed some light on syllabus planning and materials developments for these three levels of education. Furthermore, results pointed out that the language components were highly correlated with language skills, indicating that the components shared common traits with language skills. The English curriculum for Thailand is designed to be flexible and wider in scope in order to accommodate students of differ-

ent level of ability and goal. They are terminal at each level but also serve those who wish to continue in higher education. The English language syllabi include socio-cultural functions, giving and asking for emotional and moral information, and cognitive-linguistic functions. At the lower secondary level communication is emphasized, while both communication and criticism are stressed at the upper secondary level of education. The university English curriculum generally consists of 3-5 tiers of foundation English or basic English courses, English for academic or specific purposes, advanced, professional and technical English courses. Even though the four skills are included in the syllabi at all levels, different emphases should be placed on students in different educational levels who have different ages, levels of readiness and maturity.

Social Underpinnings

Thailand, like many other Southeast Asian countries, is experiencing a rapid increase in the use of English. It is by far the most popular foreign language in the secondary schools and universities. Telecommunications also speed the use of English in homes across the countries. The popularity of CNN News, IBC entertainment and information channels and the internet have proven that globalisation is rapidly taking place here.

Pragmatic requirements for curriculum design demand input from cultural envelopes from both inside and outside of the classroom. Interactions among students, teachers, home and society are guidelines for syllabus design to best suit individual and societal needs and demands. The

original 1996 English curriculum stipulates the following socio-cultural functions for learning objectives, materials developments and evaluation. These functions are undergoing revision together with the set curriculum itself. They are as follows:

Socialising : greetings, leave-taking, introducing, interrupting, attracting attention, maintaining conversation, using different modes of address, inquiring about health; **Giving and asking for emotional and moral information** : thanking and responding to thanks, apologising and accepting an apology, expressing admiration and compliment, expressing approval and disapproval, expressing interest and disinterest, giving compliments, expressing needs, expressing sympathy and consolation, sharing wishes and hopes, expressing satisfaction and dissatisfaction, expressing likes and dislikes, expressing comprehension and lack of comprehension; **Cognitive-Linguistic Functions** : asking for and giving factual information, asking for and giving intellectual information, e.g., discussion, debate, summarising, analysing texts using references, transferring information transfer, presenting the validity of information.

Part Five : Practical outlook for today's students and classrooms. Today, with the growth of IT in language learning, students in foreign or second language classrooms are constantly participating in networked interactions. Multimedia and computer-assisted language learning have far-reaching consequences for curriculum design and implementation. As Ortega (1997:83) succinctly stipulates, students' language development is enhanced by their motivation to "stretch their linguistic resources" to cope with real

communication demands. In programme delivery and classroom management, flexibility is crucial to meet the demands of today's students, who are constantly involved in the sharing of information with their teachers, peers, and electronic pals while performing tasks assigned through materials and media. Set coursebooks or materials may not adequately serve the learning needs of today's students; carefully selecting interesting, authentic materials at the right level and complexity on a

day-to-day or week-to-week basis is necessary to meet the fast-changing demands. Chayanuvat (1996:13) recommends the themes and topics that require students' analytical skills and challenge their critical thinking. The materials and tasks demand students' opinions and suggestions. Set texts and materials to consolidate students' organisational competence are useful but need to be supplemented by the aforementioned types of materials.



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