

ELT in Thailand: An Outline for Conceptual and Practical Reform

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It often seems that the very people involved in the field of foreign language pedagogy overlook the fact that learning a foreign language is arguably one of the most mentally and socially demanding, personally challenging and epistemologically complex processes humans undertake. Yet, as 'experts' and practitioners we tend to forget this because the 'practical' demands of instruction, classroom management and the institution take precedence. This inhibits sustained reflection and critique of our practices, and 'true' purposes and goals. What this in turn means is that in our daily activities we either veil or undermine our most fundamental assumptions regarding language learning and how it is best achieved. Thus, our basic frameworks may crumble.

This essay aims to identify, re-examine and open for discussion three broad but important areas in foreign language pedagogy that should form the basis of any well-structured conceptual framework in the Thailand educational landscape. From this the main practical consequences that emerge are discussed. Though many other issues could of course be mentioned, and in much greater detail, the issues singled out here emerge as a result of personal experience as a lecturer and teacher-educator in Thailand.

Conceptual Framework

As the various themes discussed below touch on some of the most profound epistemological and ontological complexities that underpin foreign language teaching and learning, the following passages represent a very truncated version of a conceptual position we might consider.

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Theory and Practice

There can be no improvement, progress or change in foreign language teaching (FLT) if it is not underpinned by a well-reasoned conceptual framework, a rationale and a range of goals. However, in our field we often seem averse to showing an interest in philosophical issues, where being 'practical' takes precedence over being theoretical, or alternatively, where as practitioners we unknowingly internalize the handed-down fundamental theoretical assumptions and paradigms of our predecessors which thus remain unexamined in our practical lives.

In the last few decades however, scientific and social theorists have stressed that theory and practice are far from separable (Anderson 1996; Bernard Donals 1998; Bruffee 1986). As such, we must recognize that everything we do in practice as teachers – including what we make our learners do, implicitly carries a range of theoretical assumptions. This is because, as conventional wisdom holds, theory posits the existence of material or cognitive phenomena that we subsequently describe and hierarchize in terms of importance and worthiness of our interest and research:

All normalized fields of inquiry, exact or hermeneutic, work to contain what events can mean and seek to justify that meaning-making work on their claims (Anderson 1996: 163).

This being the case, when theory has successfully legitimized its 'containment of events,' pedagogy in turn prescribes how we can (re)create them – generally in 'controlled' conditions such as classrooms. In other words, theory constructs a domain of knowledge, and pedagogy and education perpetuates the validity of this domain by teaching it. Thus, behind every role play, behind every task and behind every grammar exercise, for example, a theory of what is being taught and learned is guiding its operationalization, even when the theoretical presuppositions behind that 'what' are long forgotten.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that further questions arise regarding the transference from theoretical generation to practical recreation of phenomena and meanings. That is, we must ask how epistemologically and ontologically pure the phenomena remain when they are taken from theoretical understanding and presented in an educational format. How can we be sure that we are teaching what we (and theory) say we are teaching? However, this question must remain unexplored for the moment.

Language

As a discourse – and as an industry seeking legitimation – FLT has mainly been 'fed' by scientifically-minded (applied) linguistics. This has resulted in the criticism that language teaching has taken an objectified language and then hypostatized the object of its making for pedagogical and social purposes (Morgan 1997). That is, a theoretically

defined, and ultimately reductive *version* of what language is has been treated as a real, concrete, observable material 'code,' the parts of which are logically coherent and self-sufficient for the understanding of that language.

It is this reduced code that has been and continues to be presented in language teaching. In turn, it is assumed that, when memorized, the meaning of any text encountered can be correctly 'decoded'. In our treatment and presentation of it, this translates into the underlying message that the functions and machinations of language are stable, autonomous and transparent both in semantic and perceptual terms. However because this codified version of language is only theoretical, the language-using events that we as language experts describe are predetermined *a priori* by our definitions. Green, Franquiz and Dixon discuss this effect on transcribing talk, but their comments apply to any representation of language.

The act of choosing talk is...influenced by researchers' assumptions about language, both a priori and in situ. What counts as language and what is perceived as a meaningful bit of language in situ depends on the researchers' cultural knowledge of that language's systems and discourse practices....For example, hearing a sound as stress involves understanding how stress is signalled and understood within a particular language group. To see silence as meaningful, and not merely the absence of talk, or to see someone as taking the role of questioner involves cultural understanding of the discourse practices of a social group...writing down what one hears is the result of a range of interpretive acts (Green, Franquiz and Dixon 1997:173).

Language, however, as it is often defined and taught, is not the same as communication. As opposed to 'linguistic language,' communicative practice is socially sanctioned, conceptually and physically internalized, prescribed and a strategically managed means of expression. Communication is a political, evaluative, subjective and dialogic event (Bakhtin 1986; Bourdieu 1977, 1991; Foucault 1972).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) arose to address this understanding of communication, aiming to bring these aspects to the fore in its various (and variously interpreted) methodologies and approaches. Since the 1970s CLT has emphasized 'a focus on meaning rather than form' (Nunan 1989), 'real language use,' 'authentic text,' and communicative notions and functions, and has in recent decades aimed to foster what has been called 'communicative competence' (Brown 1987; Hymes 1978; Savignon 1982).

The voices of discontent regarding CLT's success, however, have become louder and more frequent in their denunciation. CLT is seen by many to have failed and for a range

of reasons. Widdowson, for example, bluntly asserts that it has a 'highly impoverished conceptualization of communication' (Widdowson 1990: 22) and others too suggest that its approach reveals a reductive view of the nature of communicative interaction among social actors (e.g. Hall 1995; Holliday 1999).

One reason for this is because, in theoretical terms, CLT has 'grammaticized' language functionality. In other words, it says 'these are the communicative rules that you must follow in order to buy a pair of shoes'. Thus, even in the textbooks we use, the notion of 'a conversation' is turned into 'phrases that you can use' to respond/complain/make a suggestion. Yet in these cases the underlying social and personal conditions for example that give rise to such expressions are left unexplored, unanalysed and are thus clearly presumed to be transparent. The effect of such practices is to ensure that English is and remains disconnected from and meaningless to the learner as the 'language' is kept external and consequently de-personalized: learners cannot connect English to their own realities, nor to the social realities of English speakers.

Learning

In ELT 'understanding' is a word that, ironically, is all too often casually used. From syllabuses to class outlines, it is not uncommon to see phrases such as 'by the end of the course/class students will be able to understand...'. Yet how this understanding is accomplished – and how we can *tell* if it has been accomplished are indeed ancient and profound questions.

Thus, the quote from Green, Franquiz and Dixon above illustrates that what we as language educators choose as important and meaningful is preordained by our understanding of a speech or communicative event. This becomes highly problematic when we assume that it is only a matter of (re)presenting¹ our understanding for the learner to develop his or her understanding.²

Most educational practices continue to operate under a basic epistemological paradigm that assumes a direct correspondence between what is taught and what is learned:

Too often teaching strategies and procedures seem to spring from the naive assumption that what we ourselves perceive and infer from our perceptions is there, ready-made, for the students to pick up, if only they had the will to do so (von Glasersfeld 1996: 5).

¹Any act of presentation or description is always 'detoured' through the person presenting. Hence it is always a (re)presentation, since it is presented 'again'.

²It also illustrates how ontological issues (what we describe) are bound up with epistemological issues (how we can claim know we are describing it correctly)

When we assume that learners understand the 'same thing' in the 'same way' that we do, we are dismissing alternative learning strategies and processes, as well as evaluating their understanding from limited and often unjustified perspectives. Such approaches allow little room for individualization or, for that matter, learning. Arguably, for its part, language teaching also almost always - at least implicitly - subscribes to positivist, objectivist and cognitivist learning theories: the general *modus operandum* demands that learners to acquire the objectified 'building blocks' of language - because this is what we have decided makes language understandable, which, when learned (and demonstrated), are presumed to represent communicative competence.

There are myriad learning theories and models. Currently popular in general education are Vygotskian-based sociocultural learning (e.g. Lantolf 1993; 2000; and Pavlenko 1995) and constructivism (von Glasersfeld 1989; 1996), both of which hold that understanding and (models of) reality are generated by the learner, rather than mirrored. Other theories that have enjoyed interest and experimentation in general theory, but which have received relatively little attention in FLT, include experiential learning (Kolb 1984) and collaborative learning, as well as Random Access Instruction (Spiro et al. 1999). These too stress the need to acknowledge that learners are not empty 'vessels' into which knowledge is poured, but rather that any knowledge is actively constructed by the learner. In other words, what is generally stressed in these theories is that 'understanding' is an individual achievement, and is not a simple reproduction of what has been presented or taught.

The above-mentioned sociocultural learning theory also holds that individuals develop concepts and understanding through mediation, through associations, and by generating conceptual networks (this is supported by philosophical, neurological, psychological and sociological findings). In other words, we learn not simply by remembering or storing 'information,' but by linking various experiences in our lives into personalized meaning-making networks. All of our experiences are 'attached' to and associated with other experiences and concepts: and because we all have relatively different personal experiences, our associative networks cannot be completely determined, even if to some degree, a learner's classroom experiences can.

In addition to sociocultural theories, constructivist theories, briefly, also subscribe to coherence models of reality, and are compatible with policies and approaches that aim to personalize and individualize learning. Constructivism holds that people construct their knowledge and understanding in coherent, non-linear and unpredictable ways and the pedagogies that have emerged from this view stress that learning needs to be individualized.

Moreover, there must be 'stakes' when the learners produce English. That is, there should be a authentic purpose to their work, which goes beyond the mid and end semester evaluation periods. For example, just as in 'real life' when we write something we do so for someone to read (not to mark). Even if they are not in front of us, we always have an audience that we are addressing, and our language, bearing and communicative strategies change accordingly. If learners have real and varied audiences, they will need to invest more time not only in the quality of their work, but in the manner of their work.

In order to facilitate learning in which the personal investment stakes are more genuine we might consider the following learning principles offered by Gee:

1. The insertion principle: 'Efficacious learning of a new complex system is a process involving socially supported and scaffolded insertion into an activity that one does not yet understand'
2. The routine principle: Activities that are ritual or routine serve to 'freeze' meaning for observation and understanding.
3. The public principle: 'The meanings of the parts of new systems, whether words, visual symbols, actions, or objects must initially be rendered public and overt so that the learner can see the connection between the sign and their interpretations'
4. The context variability principle – There is a need for a variety of contexts in which 'general rules' can be inferred from specific situations.

(Gee 1995: 336-346)

If we could construct environments in which multiple and varied communicative needs had to be met, then our learners would not be constrained by the static, artificial and hence incomprehensible 'language' activities that dominate so much of their English 'input' or 'exposure'.

Teaching

Given that learning is not an absolutely shared, predictable and homogenized process, what remains for us as educators to do is to provide not necessarily materials (of which we already have mountains) or methods, but conditions in which learners have the opportunity to associate their learning to outcomes that go beyond listening to teacher explanations or the fulfilment of tasks and exercises.

This is by no means suggesting that teachers should suddenly be considered redundant. Indeed, explanation, description, guidance and feedback need to remain as critical support strategies. But teachers are limited in what they can do in all of these aspects both in terms of face-to-face time and materials preparation but also conceptually. That is, we need to admit that one instructor's personality, explanations and preferred teaching style of delivery are not going to be suitable or beneficial to each learner – this

would be to presume a homogeneity among our learners that, as has been discussed, they do not have. This is one of the principle reasons for our efforts to broaden our learner's experiences and exposure to the target language.

In order to facilitate this we need to:

- Acknowledge that learning cannot be straight-jacketed by timetables and classrooms. Learning is random and unpredictable and as educators we must provide room and time for learners to learn different things at different rates.
- Provide learners with multiple means to 'access' English materials, texts etc.
- Commensurately, give learners access to much more than 'English,' but to references, lifestyles, cultural practices and so on.
- Educate learners in various learning approaches, and encourage them to discover and follow preferred learning styles.
- Provide more feedback in more ways.
- Develop the faculties of interpretation, analysis and critique.

When we aim to teach learners English, then, we should ensure that it is communicative strategies and expression that we develop as much as any so-called skill. In other words, we need to get learners to concentrate on *how they present themselves* and how to manage these self-presentations to match their *social* intentions.

Practical Issues

Having provided this admittedly hurried discussion of various theoretical issues, what remains is to consider what the consequences of these are on our practices. Clearly there would be many. However, in what follows the focus will be placed on three.

The Issue of Learner-Centred Instruction

In recent years FLT has been developing and pursuing an interest in learner-centred instruction. Indeed, 'learner-centred' has become something of a buzzword in ELT circles to which much lip service is paid. As such, its meaning is often left unexplored and on the whole efforts to create genuine learner-centred curricula have only been weak. It has become an important area of interest however, precisely because of the realization that learners and individual learning processes as well as that the 'meanings' learners construct are heterogenous, and that the language learning conditions that classrooms provide cannot cater to this variety. Learner-centeredness aims to create conditions in which a variety of learning styles can be accommodated.

Benson and Voller distinguish five definitions of learner-centred instruction:

1. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;

4. for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
5. for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

(Benson and Voller 1997: 1-2)

Given this range, one of the first things we need to clarify is which (or which combination) of these definitions a language institute or teacher wants to adopt. In general numbers 3, 4 and 5 are not currently operationalized in most FL/EL institutions in Thailand.

If there is a genuine intention to encourage more independent study in this country, rather than simply pay lip service to currently popular catchphrases and ideas, we need to:

- Provide learners with the tools, approaches and strategies needed to personally interpret and analyse communicative events. This means training students, perhaps for a whole semester, in how to study, how to analyse and how to critique, how to do research and reference.
- Foster and encourage learners to be curious and inquisitive and to reward them for this effort.
- Give learners more responsibility in their own efforts. They should also be made aware however, that this responsibility carries with it the burden of tougher evaluation in terms of effort and dedication.
- Genuinely give learners greater flexibility and negotiative powers regarding the fulfilment and completion of their independent work.

Self-Access learning Centres

Increasing numbers of FLT and ELT institutions have recognized the value of self-access language learning centres (SALLC). These are usually large rooms set aside as places where students can undertake self-directed language study. While this is of course a positive step, self-access centres do not always fulfil their potential for a number of reasons:

- For one, SALLCs are often used as places where students do only 'guided' learning. In these cases, however, learners are doing no more than just extra exercises. That is, in guided learning they are doing no more than repeating 'more of the same' exercises, rather than broadening their exposure and approach through different means.
- The exercises they do are self-contained: once finished they are isolated productions that often have no communicational bearing. Language rules and functions are thus rendered meaningless and promote the notion that language is a code that is memorized, not felt or personalized: for any language to be

'meaningful,' the speaker must have a personal 'investment' in the outcome of an interaction.

- Even when not guided, the range of available types of exercise is often limited to learning packages, an assortment of authentic texts and an array of dog-eared activity books. When authentic materials such as magazines, newspapers and films are provided, students are left to their own devices with them: they are not equipped to approach them in an analytical, critical or interpretative way.
- It is not uncommon to see students simply copying off their friends. This obviously requires little effort on their part.
- SALLCs are like an added-on obligation for students. If they were more integral to courses (for example, learners might have to complete an independent project to be presented in class) - yet more individualized, more benefits might be gained from them.
- Finally, it is imperative that in the interests of learner-centeredness we make available multiple procedures and methods for our students. This would entail, for example, giving learners the choice (or simply making them do each type) of a number of *types* of courses in terms of delivery. Learners could for instance choose to do a totally computer based course, a mix of computer-based and teacher-fronted, teacher-led courses, or even highly independent or, conversely, dependent ones.

In sum, the biggest problem in creating self-access learning centres is that their potential is reduced by only being used to serve standard and traditional LT frameworks. Thus, in self-access centres 'autonomy is too often reduced to choices about which video to watch or which tape to listen to' (Pennycook 1997: 42).

Teacher training

There is often a clear disparity between the communicative competence of Thai teachers who have studied overseas and those who have not. Even if we accept the initial reasoning that this is because overseas trained teachers have been exposed to more English, the issue that really emerges from this is whether the experience overseas-trained teachers have gained is really capitalized on. Do and can these teachers return to Thailand with new insights into the target language and culture, the learning process and pedagogical strategies *and then* apply them in the classes they teach? Or are they expected to follow the same structure-based impersonal and hygienic exercises as before? It would clearly be a better investment in teaching resources if the fortunate ones who have been overseas could genuinely develop, express and above all *share* their knowledge.

Having said this, teachers not fortunate enough to have experiences of foreign cultures should neither be considered inferior or disadvantaged. However, the question does remain as to what degree they have been trained regarding not only how to teach, but

how to question the whole EL teaching business per se. They should be conversant with various discourses, theories, approaches, problematics and critiques. If not, how much support – financial, academic, peer or otherwise can they expect? In order to facilitate this there should be a teacher development network or community for teachers to share their strategies, knowledge and experiences. (This at any rate applies to all teachers.) Teaching is a very demanding profession, and without developmental, financial and intellectual rewards, it can quickly lead to burn-out. As a result teaching and learning suffer.

Language Institutions

University language institutes throughout the country currently provide ‘services’ to other faculties or institutes, whether they be within the same university or external customers. Perhaps one problem arising from this is that there is a perception – despite the frequent argument that some English competence is fast becoming a basic requisite for Thais – that English learning is less important, that it is only meeting obligations and that, worst of all, learning English is merely a perfunctory process entailing work that is – and should be – less demanding.

As a result many institutions have to deal with large numbers of students and this can have the effect of making English learning a ‘production line’ affair. While of course students may never need to use their English competence in their careers or daily lives, thus seemingly negating the imperative to learn it well, one might be inclined to react by asking what the point is at all. That is, if we do not produce competent and confident English users because students might never use it, then why invest and ultimately waste all that time (and money) trying to teach them?

We must aim to develop not only the English ‘skills’ of students, but their intellects. That is, by the time English majors enter their third year (or even second year) they must have been prepared and groomed to analyse and interpret, undertake research, and express and support their opinions, and beliefs in English.

Conclusion

Despite the maturity of FLT, we still have a long go before we can claim to understand how languages are learned. Indeed, given the complexity of the process, we may never truly know. However, in many ways this has been recognized so that instead of trying to apply ever new fashionable but ultimately unsuccessful approaches and methods, language pedagogy has rightfully begun to concentrate not (only) on transferring or duplicating knowledge from teacher to learner but in creating the right conditions and environment for FLL. In this essay an attempt was made to provide a broad outline of a theoretical approach to ELT that justifies this effort. In turn this theoretical outline was linked to the practical concerns of foreign language teaching.

Commensurately however, the attitudes of institutions, practitioners and not the least students need to change so that English learning is not only a means to pass and confer grades or to pay lip-service to government policies, but is genuinely encouraged and desired as a means to facilitate communication and business in an internationalized arena.

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