Research Article

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ENGLISH TEACHERS' REFLECTION ON THEIR CHALLENGES AND INSTRUCTIONAL MANAGEMENT IN PATTANI PROVINCE IN THAILAND

Sirikarn Thongmak[*]

English Language Teaching Department, Faculty of Education, Naresuan University

*E-mail: sirikarnt@nu.ac.th

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study aimed to explore and critically report the challenges and limitations which influence the instructional management of five English teachers in Pattani province, the southern border of Thailand. The participants of the study were five English teachers working in a primary school in Pattani province. This qualitative analysis was conducted based on the semi-structured interview. Their personal life experiences, challenges they faced, and instructional management were revealed and then discussed in detail. The findings indicated that there were certain challenges and instructional management developed by the teachers to address the educational situation. Furthermore, the teachers' needs were obviously in terms of security, effective teaching methodology, as well as material development to practically serve their local circumstances.

Keywords: English Teachers' Reflection, Challenges of Working, Southern Thailand's Border Provinces

Introduction

The desired role of English language teachers is to promote the effective teaching and learning process and foster students' English language proficiency to achieve the ultimate goal in the globalized world of communication (Todd, 2007). However, in

Thailand, the English language education is far from achieving its satisfactory outcome due to a number of limitations and challenges that the Thai teachers have been facing in most parts of the country. Unlike well-known schools in big cities, they seem to enjoy their prestige and popularity among Thai elites and rich families who have gained the socioeconomic advantages over the unprivileged (Kirtikara, 2001). Therefore, this evidence leads to the education inequality that is discussed over and over for years. The universal resolution for this is to improve the language education by eliminating the obvious shortage and upgrading what must be done in other parts of the educational system as well (Prasartpornsirichoke & Takahashi, 2013). The overall failure of educational situation in Thailand is clearly seen for decades, especially in the southern areas where the marginalized groups of people reside.

That is, in the current unrest situation of the three southern provinces of Thailand, non-native English teachers in this region often encountered graving problems which have occurred continually (Brooks, 2014). With the attempt to confront with the situation, the teachers have many difficulties in their instructional management.

The expectation is high from the core educational policy (Ministry of Education, 2008) enacted by the ministry of education. Thai students are supposed to perform their language ability effectively in four skills. Nonetheless, there are other hidden factors as well as unrevealed challenges to make the desired learning outcome possible in the three provinces. Although a number of previous studies on educational aspects in the unrest southern provinces of Thailand have been conducted (e.g. Farrungsang, 2008; Wisalaporn, 2009; Liow & Pathan, 2010; Premsrirat & Uniansasmita, 2012; Brooks, 2014), none of research has been critically focusing on English language teaching.

Research Objectives

For this reason, the present study is an attempt to fill the gap by conducting an in-dept phenomenological study to investigate and critically report the challenges and limitations which influence the attitudes and instructional management of five English teachers working in a high school in a primary school in Pattani province, one of the main unrest areas in the south of Thailand.

Research Questions

What are the teachers' attitudes towards the challenges and instructional management of the English teachers who have taught in the primary schools of Pattani province?

How do the challenges and instructional management reflect the teachers' needs and circumstances?

Research Scope

The qualitative analysis was conducted based on the semi-structured interview. Their personal life experiences and instructional management were explored and then discussed in detail. The findings would hopefully serve as a reference to future educators and researchers interested in this relevant area of study.

Literature Review

In Thailand, the educational reformation process initiated as a part of the 1999 Educational Act with the emphasis on placing English at the forefront of national intellectual development (Trakulkasemsuk, 2018). As a compulsory subject for all primary grades, English language teaching and learning have been carried out with the hope of increasing the English proficiency of Thai citizens. In order to promote English to become a main medium of communication in both global and local communities, the notion of communicative language teaching (CLT) has been proposed to implement with a dynamic practice in the real English language classroom (Baker & Edwards, 2012). According to the National Education Curriculum (2002), the reformed educational policy of the developmental plan at the tertiary level (2002- 2006) brings about a lot of changes in English language teaching at both secondary and tertiary levels through decentralizing syllabus. That is, the educational plan shifted English as a Foreign Language curriculum policy from being centralized to refocus on the decentralization of responsibilities to local level with the consolidation of education planning at the central level. Thus, all public school teachers have been urged to design their own English course syllabuses to match with the needs of local students by means of developing their localized syllabus, adding local cultural components, adopting various teaching approaches, and encouraging communicative language teaching methods (Hilado-Deita, 2015). However, in real practice, the present situation of English language teaching in Thailand has still been criticized as a dismal failure from not being able to implement the policy to improve

the overall instruction as there are certain difficulties and challenges in reforming the curriculum.

Research Methodology

This phenomenological research aims to focus on the study of an individual's lived experiences within a particular context in order to understand individual situations and profound experiences in detail. Hence, the qualitative analysis was the main method of this study.

Participants

The participants of this study are five English teachers from a primary school in Pattani province, Thailand. They were purposefully chosen based on their experience of working in the province. This purposive subject selection was done according to the salient demographic factor that this group of teachers primarily teaches English as their major subject. The selected number was also sufficient when compared to the other qualitative studies (e.g. Baker & Edwards, 2012). Therefore, the main participants of this study are Thai-Buddhist English teachers who have been teaching English for fundamental courses of the primary schools in Pattani province for at least 5 years. The approach of curriculum designed as seen in the following figure was added to us the criteria of how the teacher constructed their curriculum and teaching methodology.
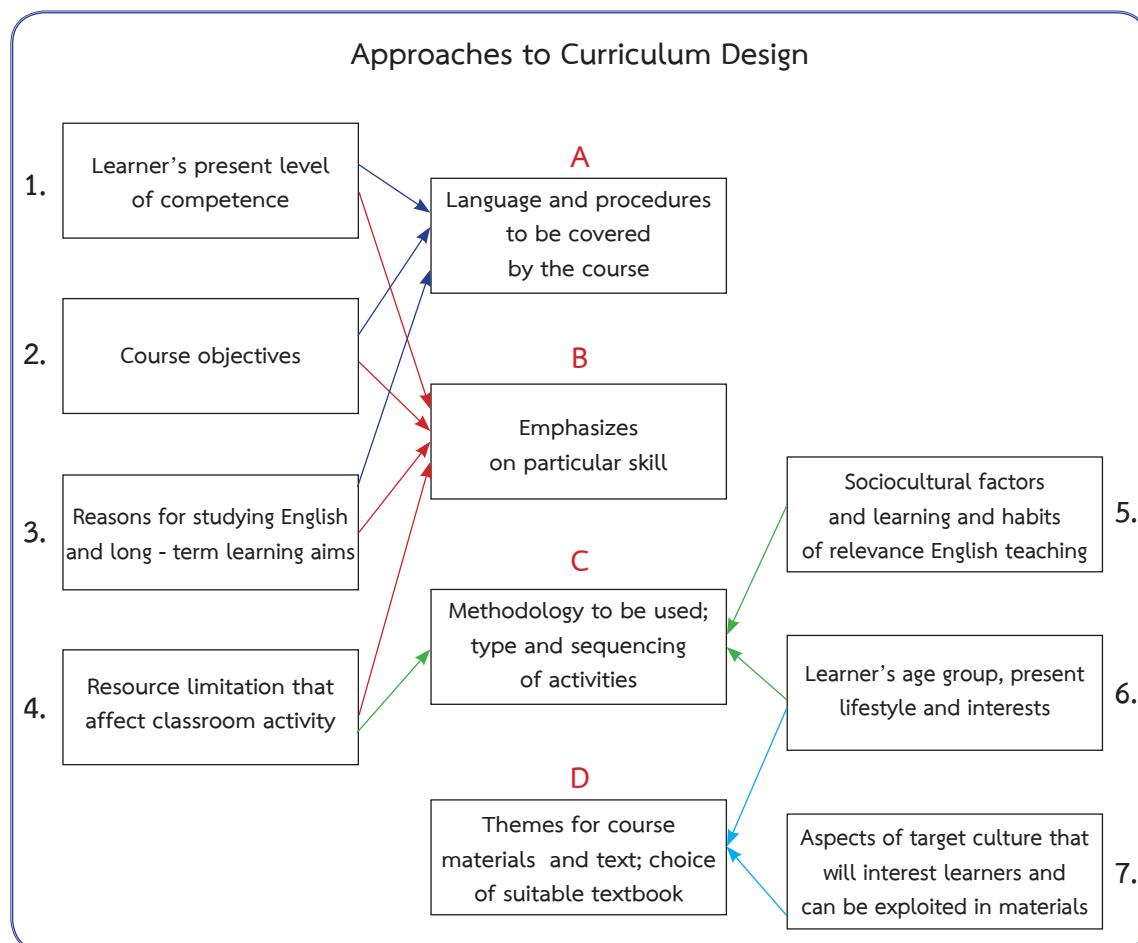
Figure 1 Approaches to curriculum design

The criterion of teaching for five years could assure that they have a direct experience in conducting their English class in the context of educational situation of southern border province to a certain extent. In addition, the researcher conducted the semi-structured interview protocol and gather relevant documents including their detailed teaching legislation, school manuals, online databases to ensure a context of the target participants' accounts.

Instrumentation

Focusing on the challenges and instructional management based on their personal points of view, the researcher

employed the qualitative method of enquiry based on a semi-structured interview, including 20 questions with main and sub aspects to gather the primary data. The semi-structured interview is suitable for this study because it elicits the perception of the interviewee in all aspects (Creswell, 2008). In other words, this study was conducted in the qualitative method focusing on the perception analysis which requires the abstractly in-depth data. Consequently, it yields the satisfactory results in terms of analyzing complex data, cooperative interaction, open-ended opinion, and flexible elaboration. These enable the researcher to go deep into the qualitative analysis of the study. Also, with the rapport built up during the interview, the ideas substantially emerged on their own by the trust between the interviewer and interviewees. In the case that the participants ran out of ideas, the interviewer prompted them back on track right away. After studying the interview transcriptions, the researcher analyzed ideas and comments to sort and compare with one another. As common and divergent themes were then recognized, the results were coded, sorted, and analyzed again for meaning. As proposed by Canagarajah (1999) and Richards (2009), these kinds

of testimony and interview promote the development of ELT literature on non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs). The use of interview could provide insights into people's experiences, beliefs, and personal perceptions. The synthesis of the participant's interview could form a picture in response to the research questions focusing on the participants' personal background and specific enquiry. The data collected was evaluated upon its completion in order to obtain adequate feedback to achieve sufficient clarity and validity of the instrument. The questions in the semi-structured interview were cross-checked by another expert to ensure they are correct and reliable. At the beginning of all interviews, the participants were briefed on the scope of the study and they were requested to sign a consent form. All interviews were recorded. An individual interview lasts about 40 minutes with each of the five participants. The language used in the interviews was Thai, first language of both interviewer and participants. The researcher conducted the recording translation on her own pace in order to maintain all key information in details.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed by focusing on salient themes

that emerged from the data. The themes were rewritten based on the findings of pilot study before full scale analysis. The transcripts of these interviews were analyzed with a focus on meaning coding, condensing the meaning and interpreting as discussed in detail in model based on the criteria of figure 1 shown in section 3. To determine reliability number of agreement was divided by total number of agreement and disagreement. The findings revealed that initially there was 85% of agreement. The disagreements were resolved in further meetings. In the same vein, pattern coding was used to reduce "large amounts of data into smaller number of analytic units" (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Then, these thematic units and other codes that were derived from remaining transcripts were compared and contrasted in order to categorize the group data. At times meanings expressed by the interviewees were abridged and condensed into shorter forms. The categories were partly pre-determined and certain emerged themes were added in the process of coding and data analysis.

Findings, Conclusion and Discussion

In relation to research question 1: What are the challenges and instructional management of the English teachers who have taught in the primary schools of Pattani province? The results are as follows.

Challenges

All teachers reflected that they and their school have been experiencing many challenges in terms of insecurity, cultural differences, psychological states and work overload. They also noted that the main challenges result from the unrest situation.

• Insecurity to their working life

All of the teachers demonstrated a great concern from their insecurity to their daily and working life. Once the unrest situation has been taken place, the teachers have been very worried about the situation and security of themselves and their students. They have to prepare themselves for the situation every time. As described by the respondent:

"When I started working in Pattani, there was no any unrest situation like this. After 7 years later, the situation has been changed a lot and I needed to prepare myself to handle the unexpected situations every time. I am very worried about an unexpected incident while I am teaching."

Cultural differences and personalized adjustment

The teachers pointed out that that the main drives of challenges that they have to deal with have occurred from the cultural

differences between Thai-Buddhist teachers and their students who are 90% Muslims, and with the local community members who are rly 100% Muslims. As described by one of the respondents: *"There has been more distinctively discrimination between Thais and Muslims. When I have become a teacher, I have to adjust myself and learn a lot apart from the content I teach."* With the impact from the unrest situation and cultural difference, almost teachers stressed how they could do to handle the problem appropriately and reasonably so as to avoid causing disunity and conflicts with their students and the local people.

• **Psychological problem**

The teachers pointed out the fact that it is undeniable that Thai-Buddhist teachers here become fearful of the unrest situation even if they are guarded by the soldiers, policeman or even concerned people. While their stress is getting higher, the motivation to live in that community or teaching and working become lower. The quality of work has dropped as well. As one of the respondents expressed negative feeling:

"After I came across the unrest situation, I felt worried with every situation I was surrounded by. Stress was increased more and more. It affected the way I *worked and quality of my job too. I felt that I didn't want to work anymore. I wanted to quit the job and escape to other places."*

• **Work overloads**

Over Half of the interviewees, including three teachers, also acknowledged that they have their own heavy workloads and are driven by many pressures. As indicated by one informant:

"I found lots of problem affecting my working. Apart from being a director and having to take care of all kinds of school administration, I am a school director who needs to teach students by myself because of the limited number of teacher and unlimited workload. Due to the unrest situation, I could not work at school after 4 pm. So, I have to bring a lot of them to do at my home. This affects the time I have to prepare my lesson to develop my knowledge since I have to teach the subject which I am not familiar with. I think this is a problem since it affects the quality of students' knowledge."

Instructional management

Teachers also pointed to factors relating to their problematic instructional management according to the abovementioned challenges which are mostly influenced from the impact of the unrest situation and their demotivation.

It involves professional development in understanding how their teaching practices and school management supports education in this context. The tendency towards the unusual and problematic school instructional management during the violent situation was mentioned. The teachers expressed their voice as follows;

• **Dealing with the instruction**

The teachers commonly highlighted the students' English proficiency and their low motivation based on the situational context contributing to the problem of planning the lesson and conducting their teaching approach. They stated that the audiolingual approach and the grammar translation method are mainly implemented to suit the students' level proficiency. As mentioned by one of the respondents;

"Most courses I teach mainly focus on the ability of students to read and remember vocabulary by using both students' L1, Yawi, and Thai language in order to enable students to understand the meaning. I sometimes show pictures of the vocabulary words they learn. I play audio-visual materials repeatedly for students to listen and speak repeatedly because the students rather have problems with English pronunciation. I read for them and make them repeat. For grammar, I choose the issues that will appear in the exam and explain each issue clearly before the exam." Many kinds of materials, tools and activities are implemented in the class due to the teacher's preference. The activities are designed based on the focus of the lesson, for example; role play and asking and answering questions are the main motions applied in the speaking and listening classes. In addition, technology is also applied in teaching especially whenever they got limited of teaching time since the teacher and students can work on it. Giving illustration, explanation and examples to the students are the method that all teachers always utilized in the class. Most of the time, the teacher would provide the lesson revision after finishing the lesson in each semester.

• **Dealing with the cultural differences**

The responses of the participants pointed to a similar ways of gaining their awareness towards' the cultural differences issue, especially when conducting the instruction with the content relating to the topics of culture, religion, ethnic and different way of life. There were frequent remarks related to higher interactivity of

adjusting to approximate the local culture and accommodate students with their local content. They try to find out the authentic materials associated to their Muslim cultural backgrounds and identity such as pictures from a magazine, internet contents, events from a newspaper to substitute the pictures or contents provided on the commercial textbooks. They believed that the material adaptation and adjustment could serve their students' need and interest and finally enable them to increase their motivation in learning English, as expressed by one of the informants:

"Main activities are the same as other normal schools. There are flag respecting activity and homeschool but Buddhist ceremonies are totally excluded like praying to Buddha images or festival about Buddhism. They are excluded. The only festival that remains is New Year's Day. Another way is I look for the activities that I think the students are interested apart from what is in the book. For example, I make the students find pictures of Muslim festivals and describe easily in 3-4 sentences. It can be holiday or attractions they have been or want to go. This can motivate them and make them want to learn very well. Local cultures, Yawi language and religion issues should be included in the teaching

content."

Regarding the research question 2., focusing on the attitudes towards the challenges and instructional management to reflect the teachers' needs and circumstances. The results are as the following.

Needs and circumstances

• Syllabus and material design

As it is clearly noticed that Pattani, the focus area of this study, is the domain of Muslim people – people there mostly are Islam. However, the lesson used in the school and the national test were based on the mainstream one designed by the Ministry of Education, Thailand, which are implemented with all types of students and context. The contents in the lesson are quite for from the students' background knowledge which affects how students comprehend the lessons. The participants disclosed that it would be better if there are the lesson related to each context and culture, it could be utilized in the school or educational area where they share some similarity and differences can't cause any problems.

Responses of teachers mark a significant awareness in the consideration of a curriculum design and acquisition of educational objectives to fit with

the students' need. They put an emphasis on the content used in the class which should relate to students' real life and their local context. This illustrated by the discussion from one of the teachers: *"After my last lesson was not succeeded as I expected, I try to change the topic and some parts of content for students. First, I do some searching to make sure that the topics I will teach is suitable for students' need and interest. I skip some part from the textbooks which seem to make students bored and change it with their familiar information."*

For this matter, the Ministry of education should raise awareness in order to reconstruct the teaching content, learning materials to align with assessment for learning outcome based on the aims of decentralization determined by the educational core curriculum.

• **Teaching methodology**

In order to push the teachers to accomplish the goal of instruction in the beginning, the quality of teachers themselves should be considered. The opportunity to enhance the teachers' skills is vital for them such as further their study abroad and join the training to fulfill their competence in teaching. The training can relate to how to teach English more

effectively since most of them did not get a degree in English major or teaching English, so they lack of these kinds of skill. One more thing that the participants mentioned is using technology in teaching.

• **Establishing collaboration between schools and local community**

The responds expressed a positive view of building the effective relationship with the local communities and all stakeholders. All of the teachers pointed out in the same way that even though that building strong collaboration between schools and the local community could not done smoothly owing to the unrest situation and different cultural backgrounds, it is regarded as the highly effective way to help them perform their instruction and education management successfully.

The challenges and instructional management of the English teachers who have taught in the primary schools of Pattani province as stated in the result section indicate reflect the teachers' needs and circumstances in many ways. The challenges post insecurity to their working life. Security is very crucial for every worker in all domains because all workers desire to work in a safe and protected atmosphere. It is regarded as a key factor that brings about the wellness of workers' life and enables the workers be

fully responsible for completing joy (Davies, 2011). The unrest situation occurred in Pattani province causes the Thai-Buddhist teachers lack a feeling of morale and affects their psychology state. The insecurity would increase the teachers' negative emotions to perform the effective work and reduce their encouragement or happiness in working. Along the same situation, if other employees have faced with the insecurity to their working life in the long-term period, it could impact several physical and mental health such as becoming anxiety or depression and finally decrease their self-esteem in completing their work. The insecurity, thus, is the main cause that renders the chronic problems, including encouragement and motivation in working, psychological problem, and failure of organization. Therefore, ensuring safety is a key concern to all organization, especially in educational context. Thai high school teachers are encouraged to develop their syllabus and assigned to undergo an assessment under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) without reexamining the realistic language use and cultural content related the local dimension (James & Prout, 2015). Nevertheless, this may not fit in the local needs and circumstances as found in

the study. These could obviously be explained by the adjustment towards English teacher professional identity and sociocultural dimension. As Tajfel (1978) maintained, the professional identity is formed based on the new patterns of social identity that individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity. Professional identity is also affected by the social recognition as a member of professional community and the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills and the development of new values, attitudes and behaviors. The evidence is that the teachers have learned the students' L1, Yawi, in order to facilitate their teaching more effectively. The accommodation towards students' cultural identity by learning their language is one preferable way to do to develop the teachers' professional identity at the same time. According to Tajfel, the teacher professional identity, this term is often seen to be an everlasting process; one needs to develop constantly and adapt to new situations, development and changes in the area of education. Professional identity is created through one's beliefs and attitudes, values, motives and experiences through which individuals define themselves, in their current or

anticipated professional life. It is associated with the status and esteem, mastery, sense of belonging and attachment and culture's impact. In the case of moving from a school to teach at the new local context environment, the transition may interfere with their professional identities and affect their pedagogies and teaching approaches (Cross, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to promote English language teachers to foster the sociocultural awareness which means awareness of the societies and cultures of the target language, and therefore of the local contexts the language is used in.

Suggestions and Recommendations

This study aims to reveal the reflection of the Buddhist Thai Teachers of English about on their Challenges and instructional management in Pattani province in Thailand. The results indicate certain their challenges, management as well as their needs. As we can see obviously, the southern part of Thailand consists of diverse cultures and distinctive cultural identities that are very different from other parts of Thailand. According to the National Education Act of 1999, (Revised in 2002) (Liow, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2008), it was argued that an effective language policy need to be urgently developed if

Thai education want to remain and keep a harmonious multiethnic society in the southern provinces. In the view of Thai policy-makers, thus, teachers are considered as the crucial factors who empower the effective learning environment for students and bring good things in society through their pedagogical organization. This could refocus the belief of harmonious society for these provinces owing to the major population in this province are Muslims. They are strict to preserve their culture and value their identity with their Islamic religion for a long time (Liow, 2009). The main drivers of conflict are identified through the use of language and communication, especially by means of education in local schools (Engvall and Andersson, 2014). Thus, in Thai educational setting, potential non-native teachers of English are one of the crucial factors who have contributed to effective educational environment through their teaching strategies, experience and particularly dedication.

A further qualitative study on English teachers' reflection of their lived-experience and teaching practices towards other marinized places of Thai educational context should be paid attention more, especially where the students that area who have different linguistic and cultural

backgrounds, particularly under the unrest circumstances. Clearly, a gap in research exists, and teachers as the grassroots of the educational system should be taken more consideration. This may include a study of their perceptions toward language syllabuses and their role in language teaching and learning.

REFERENCES

Baker, S. E., & Edwards, R. (2012). **How many qualitative interviews is enough.** Retrieved from http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/

Brooks, M. C. (2014). **School principals in Southern Thailand: Exploring trust with community leaders during conflict**. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/ 7638125/School_principals_in_Southern_Thailand_Exploring_trust_with_ community_leaders_during_conflict# [2014, 19 Jul.]

Chayaratheee, S., & Waugh, R. F. (2006). **Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Grade 6 students in Thailand: Cooperative learning versus Thai communicative method**. EDU-COM 2006 International Conference. (120-131). Perth Western, Australia: Edith Cowan University.

Crystal, D (2003). **English as a Global Language. 2nd edition**. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Engvall, A., & Andersson, M. (2014). The dynamics of conflict in southern Thailand. **Asian Economic Papers, 13**(3), 169-189.

Farrungsang, B. (2008). The research in educational policy of the government in check Southern border provinces (1997-2007). **Journal of Education, Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus, 19**(2), 29-43.

James, A., & Prout, A. (2015). **Constructing and reconstructing childhood**. England: Routledge.

Jory, P. (1999). Political decentralization and the resurgence of regional identities in Thailand. **Australian Journal of Social Issues (Australian Council Of Social Service), 34**(4), 337-352.

Graddol, D. (2006). **English next: Why global English might mean the end of English as a foreign language**. England: British council.

Hilado-Deita, H. C. (2015). History of English language teaching: A glimpse of Thailand scenario. **Sripatum University Journal, 12**(1), 16-26.

Kirkpatrick, A. (2008). English as the official working language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Features and strategies. **English Today, 24**(2), 27-34.

Kirtikara, K. (2001). **Higher education in Thailand and the national reform roadmap**. Invited paper presented at the Thai-US Education Roundtable. Bangkok, January 9, 2001. Retrieved from https://www.kmutt.ac.th/pi/backup/%20%20fileKK/higher%20Edu%20Reform520Roadmap.pdf

Liow, J. C. (2009). **Islam, education, and reform in Southern Thailand: Tradition & transformation**. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Liow, J. C., & Pathan, D. (2010). **Confronting ghosts: Thailand's shapeless southern insurgency** (p. 76). Lowy Institute.

Methitham, P. (2014). **Survey the landscape of ELT in Thailand: Offering new possibility for change**. In The 2014 WEI International academic conference proceedings (26-34). Budapest: The West East Institute.

Ministry of Education. (2008). **The Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D.2008)**. Bangkok: Kurusapa Ladpraob Publishing.

Noom-Ura, S. (2013). English-Teaching Problems in Thailand and Thai Teachers' Professional Development Needs. **English Language Teaching, 6**(11), 139-147.

Noopong, D. (2002). **English teaching problems and the needs for professional development of teachers of English in education extended schools under the jurisdiction of the Office of Primary Education**. English Program.

Prasartpornsirichoke, J., & Takahashi, Y. (2013). **Assessing inequalities in Thai education (No. 3-2)**. Hiroshima University, Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation (IDEC).

Premsrirat, S., & Samoh, U. (2012). Planning and implementing Patani Malay in bilingual education in Southern Thailand. **Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistic Society,** (5), 85-96.

Tajfel, H. E. (1978). **Differentiation between social groups: Studies in the social psychology of intergroup relations**. Academic Press.

Watson Todd, R. (2007). **The impact of evaluation on Thai ELT**. Proceedings of the 12th ESEA international conference: Trends and directions (118-127). Bangkok: KMUTT.