



THE CHALLENGES OF THAILAND IN PROMOTING THE STUDENTS' ENGLISH SKILLS TO BE AN EFFECTIVE ASEAN CITIZEN

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ABSTRACT

The official establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015 has become the center of global interest during the past few years. As a member of ASEAN, Thailand has been influenced by this establishment. Whereas, the English language is considered as one of the most important keys towards the development of Thailand, to keep pace with the growth of the ASEAN Community. Since it was stipulated in the ASEAN Charter, Article 34, that “The working language of ASEAN shall be English” (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2008b: 29). As a result, using English as a means of communication in the ASEAN community has become an important issue.

Despite the Thai government's efforts to promote English education in Thailand. It was obvious that the English proficiency of Thai students was relatively low compared to some countries in ASEAN. This article described the English language in the Thai context and indicated the major causes of English teaching-learning problems in Thailand, such as the teacher factor, the student factor, the curriculum factor, and classroom management. The author also proposed a guideline for the university to promote English proficiency among the students who would become the efficient workforce for ASIAN in the future.

Keywords: Association of South East Asian Nations ; ASEAN ; English teacher ; University students ; English teaching in Thailand

INTRODUCTION

The completed official establishment of ASEAN in 2015 has supported the ASEAN community to cultivate cooperation in the region, especially in terms of economics by creating a single market and regional competitiveness. This establishment was expected to bring several advantages to ASEAN members, especially, one that is well-prepared. As that country would gain the full benefits from the ASEAN community. Therefore, each country needs to prepare and improve its human

resources for the rising of competition in the ASEAN Community, especially, English proficiency of the people. (Menon, 2016).

The English language is currently accepted as an international language worldwide (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Sharifian, 2009). It was declared as an official language among the ASEAN countries and has been used as a working language by the business organizations of different countries in ASEAN. (Sasidaran, Rajan & Luu, 2019). Additionally, the free flow of professional mobility across ASEAN countries after the establishment

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of the ASEAN Community in 2015, has increased the competitiveness of working in professional careers among the citizens of ASEAN. Therefore, ASEAN countries must develop the English skill of their people to be competitive.

Among the ASEAN members, Thai students' English proficiency was relatively low compare to other countries. 17 As The average TOEFL score in 2018 revealed that the Thai students were ranked the 16th out of 24 countries in ASIAN. And the 64th out of 88 countries globally. (EF Education First, 2018). These students would eventually become valuable resources in the professional market. Therefore, their English skill should be improved to be able to compete in the ASEAN's professional market.

This article aims to analyze and indicate the causes of the English teaching-learning inefficacy in Thailand. As well as to propose the guideline for the development of English proficiency of the university students, who will become the efficient citizen and workforce of ASIAN in the future.

“English” as a foreign language in Thai Context

Unlike, some countries in South East Asia, Thailand doesn't have a long history of involvement with the English language (Kirkpatrick, 2010). The educational system in this country is mainly Thai language, While English has been used as a foreign language and the lingua franca in the Thai context (Jindapitak, 2010) Generally, English has been assigned as a compulsory subject in Thai school and higher education, It has been used and viewed as an important skill for Thai urban middle-class workers. (Wannachotphawate, 2015) However, there still difficulties in accessing English language education in rural or poorer communities. (ASIA Weekly, 2013).

At the school level, Thai students spend twelve years studying English in primary and secondary schools,

but the results are still questionable. When compared to the people in neighborhood countries, Thais' English proficiency is relatively low according to the survey conducted by EF Education First (Education First, 2018) which collected data from 1.3 million non-native speakers of English in 88 countries around the world. The outcome revealed that Thailand was ranked 64th place from 88 countries globally, and 16th place from 21 countries in Asia. While, Singapore was ranked in 1st place, followed by the Philippines and Malaysia.

Moreover, the result of an average score of the Ordinary National Education Test in respect to the English language of Thai students in 2018 was 36.34. from 100 (The Ministry of Education, 2018) This indicated the relatively low English proficient of Thai students that needs to be improved.

Under the incorporation of Thailand as a member of ASEAN. It is undeniable that Thai workers will face competitive situations due to the free flow of labor among ASEAN members (Saraithong & Chancharoenchai, 2012). Whether Thailand will receive either advantages or disadvantages from ASIAN depends upon the preparation of the country itself. Since language skill played an important role in communication processes. The low English language proficiency of Thai students can be a barrier regarding future employment of both domestic and international. Therefore, Thailand requires prompt action to enhance Thai students in terms of their English language proficiency to reassure them that they will stay competitive in the international marketplace. (Marukatat, 2012).

To be able to do so Thai government has set up a policy to raise the standard of English education for Thai students by increasing the students' English lesson time from 1 period/week to 5 periods/week. They also assigned that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) be applied to English teaching. And the educational

technologies be used to support the English learning of the students. (Matichononline, 2016).

In the big picture, though Thai people do not use English for their daily communication, and the English language proficiency of Thai students is quite low. There have been government efforts in developing English language proficiency among Thai students and workers. Since English is considered an important foreign language that Thai people use for educational and career purposes. As well as to use to communicate with foreign people from other countries including ASEAN.

Facing the truth: English teaching - learning issues in Thailand

Although, English has become remarkably important in Thai contexts, for the past decade. But there are still several issues to be addressed, such as, proficiency in English of many Thai teachers and students (Hayes, 2010) the lack of resources for English language teaching (Baker, 2012), and the English curriculum that was unsuccessful in helping the students to be able to communicate in English fluently in the real setting.

Many studies have focused on the problems of English teaching-learning in Thailand. And the majority of them agreed that the English proficiency of Thai students required improvement. (Jindapitak, 2010; Larbnongsang, 2012; Sanonguthai, 2014; Kwantip, 2014; Wannachotphawate, 2015).

Additionally, researches have indicated 4 major causes of English teaching failure in Thailand, as follows; (Jindapitak, 2014; Larbnongsang, 2012; Cheng, 2012; Sanonguthai, 2014; Kwantip, 2014; Wannachotphawate, 2015; Singhanat & Thithimadee, 2018).

The teacher factor

Many studies agreed that the problems of English teaching-learning in Thailand were due to the English

teachers/instructors. Whereas, some of them were not meet the qualification to teach English. (Wannachotphawate, 2015; Singhanat & Thithimadee, 2018). A survey, in collaboration with the University of Cambridge, measuring the qualifications of four hundred Thai teachers of English, found that a full 60% of them had knowledge of English and teaching methodologies below that of the syllabus level at which they were teaching. Of the remaining top 40%, only 3% had a reasonable level of fluency, and only 20% were teaching class levels for which they were both qualified and competent. (Singhanat & Thithimadee, 2018). Additionally, the study of Wannachotphawate (2015) found that there was a shortage of teachers of English in the secondary level because, English majored graduates wanted to work in other higher salary jobs such as flight attendants, or hotel and tourism businesses, or with private companies.

A study concerning the problem of teaching and learning English in Thailand conducted by Berg (2015), concluded that the most important factor affecting the student learning progress was the teachers, and teacher quality outweighed other factors such as motivation, funding, and class sizes. Since a qualified teacher can create the best environment for learning. However, some studies report that Thai teachers were poorly trained. Therefore, they didn't have adequate English knowledge and skill to deliver to the students. (Seesopon, 2010; Wannachotphawate, 2015).

Further, several studies indicated that, the heavy work loaded of the teachers and additional works outside of school, had left the teacher with no time for lesson preparation. Which led to poor performance in English class. For instance, nowadays, the teachers of secondary level schools, have to teach at least eighteen hours a week on average and often take on additional classes outside regular school hours in order to



supplement their relatively low salaries. Because of these overloaded burdens, their teaching styles were stuck to rote-learning, teaching grammar and translation with Thai as the medium of instruction, teacher-centered and spoon-feeding technique, and so on. (Sanonguthai, 2014, Singhanat & Thithimadee, 2018).

The Curriculum factor

English curriculum is a crucial factor that affects the English language proficiency of the students. As for Thailand, researchers have identified problems concerning the English curriculum such as Mongkolrat (2017) stated that the English curriculum for Thai students has been emphasizing reading and writing English and not communication. Besides, the teaching technique according to the English language curriculum adhered to the rote memorization which has been used in many schools over Thailand in the past. (Sanonguthai, 2014).

According to Jindapitak (2014) English grammar and conversation lessons for Thai students, were presented in the form of a worksheet or a list of rules with examples that the students were assigned to memorize and/or copy. This practice had discouraged them from interactively and practically learn the English language by themselves.

Moreover, many schools in Thailand didn't place importance on English writing. Although Thai students were deficient in English writing Practice. (Larbnongsang, 2012) Recognizing the need to improve Thai students' English proficiency. Thai governments have put their efforts to reform English teaching-learning in Thailand for instance, in January 2014 the Education Ministry of the government led by Ms.Yingluck Shinawatra (2011 - 2014) has announced the reform of English learning for Thai students. By using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a framework for the management

of English teaching and focus on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) instead of focusing on English grammar. (Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2014) Later, in the year 2015, the government led by General Prayut Chan-O-Cha (From 2014-up to the present) has set up a policy to raise the standard of English education for the students, teachers, and the people who work for the academic institutions. (Office of the permanent secretary, Ministry of Education, 2015) This includes the increase of English learning from 1 period/week to 5 periods/ week. Additionally, the government required that Communicative language Teaching (CLT) be applied to English teaching. And the educational technologies be used to support the English learning of the students. (Matichononline, 2016). So far, the policies concerning English Education in Thailand have been changed according to each government. This may result in the discontinuous implementation of each policy. (Rodsawang, 2017).

The students factor

As mentioned earlier, Thai students were accustomed to the rote memorization learning and spoon-feeding technique. Their self-learning technique were poor. Therefore, their knowledge and communication skill in English was confined to the lessons and curriculums provided by the schools. (Sanonguthai, 2014).

Outside of their school Thai students have the least opportunity to use English. Since their families use Thai language in the daily lives. Lack of English practicing in the real situation, some students were shy or avoiding speaking English in classroom or in reality, because they didn't have confidence about their English ability. (Mongkolrat ,2017) Moreover, Kwantip (2014) stated that Thai students were focus more on their grade than the knowledge they gained or the comment from their teachers.

Classroom Management factor

The inappropriate physical environment can be a barrier to the learning effectiveness of the students. (Erdogan, Kursun, Sisman, Saltan, Gok, Yidiz, 2010; Tauber, 2007). This includes the classroom size. According to (Owoeye & Yara, 2011) the size of a classroom should not be larger than 30 students, for effective learning results. However, there were schools in Thailand that provided the over-large size class for English learning, especially, the school with a large number of students but were lack of classrooms. And in the remote area where the English teachers were not sufficient. (Wannachotphawate, 2015).

Promoting the University Students' English skill to be an effective ASEAN citizen

Regarding English language education, the Thai government has placed English language education as the priority and focusing on the policy to enhance the English language proficiency of Thai people (Baker, 2012). Especially in the area of efficient communication among Thai students by integrating the English language at every educational level (Ministry of Education, 2010). On top of this, the Ministry of Education has aimed to enable Thai students to be able to communicate in English and use English to find new knowledge from various sources such as the internet. (Thithimadee, 2018). To be able to do so Thai government has put its efforts to overcome the obstacles that hindered the achievement of the students.

As for the “teacher issue”, researches revealed that one of the major causes of English language teaching-learning in the university was mainly due to the insufficient number of qualified English teachers. (Udomkiatisakul, 2016; Ungwattanakul, 2007). Therefore, the university should set a higher standard of qualification in recruiting English instructors to ensure effective learning for the students. The native-English-

speaking teachers, as well as the non-native-English-speaking teachers from the Asian countries, are required, to provide an experience of linguistic variety at the ASIAN level and the international level. (Kotchasisit, Indrasuta & Suwamaprut,2017) Funding should be allocated to the instructors for their development of English language and teaching skills. (Ungwattanakul, 2007) Moreover, the performance assessment of the instructors should include the students' academic achievement and their satisfaction. (Udomkiatisakul, 2016).

Concerning English language curriculum, the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015, has increased demand for English language education at all levels either schooling and university. The English language curriculum was considered an important factor that enables the improvement of the student's English proficiency. (ASIA Weekly, 2013) Due to the different cultures and languages among the ASIAN countries, the similar and different linguistic features of the English varieties in ASEAN should be integrated into the curriculum, whose content was typical, based upon the context of each particular country. (Meksophawannagul, 2015).

Moreover, to enable the students to learn about ASEAN through English. The English language curriculum should provide opportunities for designing instructional materials related to the ASEAN identities and linguistic characteristics, which were different among the ASEAN countries. The language spoken in every country has become an English variety within its characteristics (Wimontham, 2018) Therefore, one of the most priorities for Thai students to be able to effectively communicate with another ASEAN citizen, was to be able to understand different English varieties, so that they will gain more understanding when communicating with others non-native English speakers from ASEAN countries. (Ministry of Education, 2018).



Moreover, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) should be applied to the reform of the English curriculum in Thailand. As Nguyen (2018) suggested that English language teaching in Thailand needed to be developed in the directions that were more related to Thai learners of English as a lingua franca. And One of the most accepted instructional methods in the field of English language teaching is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), whose main goal is to increase learners' communicative competence (Boonpattanaporn, 2017). Additionally, the use of educational technologies in supporting English teaching-learning would provide a lot of benefits to the students. (Matichononline, 2016).

Regarding the student factors, the importance of English should be promoted among the students to acknowledge the advantage of being proficient in English. The modern teaching techniques that enhance the student's self-learning skill, self-responsibility, such as, task-based learning, project-based learning, Flipped-classroom, etc., should be implemented to encourage the student to be the center of the study and be able to learn by themselves. (Baker, 2012).

A proper number of English courses should be organized to respond to the need of the students. Referring to the study of Wimontham (2018) conducted a study concerning the English teaching-learning problem of university students and found that, majority of the students wanted to enroll in English language courses throughout their education years in the university. While in the real situation, Thai students only took the compulsory Fundamental English course in the first year. After that, English courses were optional or voluntary. Therefore, many students skipped the English classes through the last 3 years of their college study. (Thithimadee, 2018) stated that to develop the English proficiency of the university students. The students should be assigned to enroll in English courses through all of their education years. Moreover, English

proficiency test should be organized before the students graduated from the university to ensure their qualification of English language. Moreover, the University can set up special projects that allow the students to use English in a real situation such as, a part-time work project as a local tourist guide, a reception in the hotel, or an airport information staff, etc.

As for the classroom management issue, studies revealed that the inappropriate physical environment can be a barrier to the learning effectiveness of the students. (Erdogan et al., 2010; Tauber, 2007). These include room temperature, misplaced of the classroom, insufficient numbers of the seat. Especially, the number of students per classroom is considered as an obstacle to the comprehensive learning that needs student's attention and participation. By which the Minister of National Education, Regulation number 24 in 2007 concerning school facilities and infrastructure standards suggested that classrooms have a maximum capacity of 32 students. (Wright, 2015).

Therefore, the University should pay attention to the classroom design and provide room facilities that encourage the participation and engagement of the students in the classroom. Moreover, the number of students per classroom should not exceed 32, or else the teacher assistants are required to give support to the students.

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CONCLUSION

The English language has become more important for the ASEAN citizen, since it was declared as a working language of ASEAN. Therefore, the low English language proficiency of the college Thai students can be a barrier to the future employment in both domestic and international level.

Many studies have focused on the problems of English teaching-learning in Thailand. The majority of them agreed upon 4 major issues that were, the teacher, the English curriculum, the students, and classroom management. To overcome those obstacles required cooperation between the government and the Universities This article proposes the guideline for improving Thai college student's English proficiency as follows;

The teacher issues: A higher standard of qualification in recruiting English instructors should be set to ensure effective learning for the students. The native-English-speaking teachers, as well as the non-native-English-speaking teachers from the Asian countries, are required, to provide experience of linguistic variety at the ASIAN level and the international level to the students. Government funding should be allocated to the University for the teacher to develop their English language and teaching skill.

Curriculum issues: To enable the college students to communicate English effectively. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) whose main goal is to increase learners' communicative competence should be implemented. Educational technologies should also be employed to support English teaching-learning in the University to enhance student engagement and understanding.

Additionally, to enable the students to understand English from different countries, the shared and different linguistic features of the English varieties in ASEAN should be integrated into the curriculum.

The student issues: The University should promote the importance of the English language among the students to acknowledge the importance and the advantage of being proficient in English. The modern teaching techniques that enhance the student's self-learning skill, self-responsibility, such as, task-based learning, project-based learning, Flipped-classroom, etc., should be implemented. The students should be assigned to enroll in English courses through all of their education years. Moreover, the English proficiency test should be organized before the student's graduation to ensure their qualification of the English language.

Additionally, special activities which allow the students to use English in real life such as, a part-time work project as a local tourist guide, a reception in the hotel, or an airport information staff, etc., should be set up to encourage the use of English in the real situation.

Classroom management issue: The inappropriate physical environment can be a barrier to the learning effectiveness of the students Therefore, the classroom location, design, and facilities should be considered. Most of all the classroom size can be an obstacle for learning efficacy. Hence, it is suggested that the classroom size should not be larger than 30 students for effective learning results, or else the teacher assistants are required to give support to the students in the larger classroom.



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