

# English Language Teaching and Learning in Thailand in this Decade

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## Abstract

*The importance of English as a world language, the advance of technology and education reform envisaged by the new Thai Constitution are key determinants for new developments for English language teaching and learning in Thailand in this decade.*

*This paper will first focus on the role of English and the problems of English language teaching in Thailand. It will also touch on the part of education reform which is related to English language teaching. Then, it will state what has been planned or already done to improve the English language teaching and learning situation in Thailand, now and in the future.*

The role of English in Thailand is quite important as it is in many other developing countries. New technology and the adoption of the internet have resulted in a major transition in terms of business, education, science, and technological progress, all of which demand high proficiency in English. With the economic downturn in Thailand a few years ago, a large number of Thai companies have embraced cooperation regionally and internationally. Mergers, associations, and takeovers are common and English is used as the means to communicate, negotiate and execute transactions by participants where one partner can be a native speaker of English or none of the partners are native speakers of English.

However, Thailand has always been a country with one official language, Thai. We are proud that we have never been colonized. Another reason for having been a country with one language is the concept of national stability. There have been proposals to make Thailand a country with two languages, Thai and English, but this has never materialized due to the abovementioned reasons. English can, therefore, be at most the first foreign language that students must study in schools. Hence, Thais' level of English proficiency is low in comparison with many countries in Asia (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore). According to the speech given by the Minister of the Ministry of University Affairs on March 6, 2000, the average TOEFL scores of Thais are the same as for Mongolians but higher than for North Koreans and Japanese.

Researchers on the topics of needs and wants of English in workplaces have also suggested that the English curriculum in Thai universities cannot meet the demands for English used in the workplace. The skills used most at this level are listening and speaking which are not the focus skills in the Thai tertiary education English curriculum.

It can be said that up to now English language teaching in Thailand has not prepared Thais for the changing world. Thailand will lag behind in the competitive world of business, education, science and technology if the teaching and learning of English is not improved. Here are some comments concerning the importance of English and the problems of English language teaching in Thailand. Dr. Rom Hiranyapruet, director of Thai Software Park, stated that English is as important to the domain of information technology as other infrastructures. Thais have high proficiency in technology but because of our below average English competence, we cannot make much progress in terms of science and technology.

Mrs. Arunsi Sastramitri, director of the Academic Training Section of the Tourist Authority of Thailand, stated that tourism is the main source of income in our country. However, Thai graduates who are in the tourism industry have a poor command of English. This has contributed to misunderstanding and a negative attitude towards Thailand.

What has caused the difficulties in English language teaching and learning in Thailand especially in the primary and secondary schools? According to Biyaem, 1997, the teachers and learners face the following difficulties:

For teachers, there are many obstacles such as :

- heavy teaching loads.
- too many students in a class (45 – 60)
- insufficient English language skills and native speaker cultural knowledge.
- inadequately equipped classrooms and educational technology.
- university entrance examinations which demand a tutorial teaching and learning style.

As for the learners, they wish they could speak English fluently but most of them think that English is too challenging for them to be competent because of these difficulties:

- interference from the mother tongue (Thai) particularly in pronunciation, syntax, and idiomatic usage.
- lack of opportunity to use English in their daily lives.
- unchallenging English lessons.
- being passive learners.
- being too shy to speak English with classmates.
- lack of responsibility for their own learning.

However, it is not only the level of English competence that inhibits Thailand from being able to keep pace with the rapid changes that are taking place everywhere around us, Thai education, as a whole, does not enable Thais to cope with this fast changing world. Thailand's new constitution, adopted in 1997 has, therefore, established the National Education Act which creates the most radical education reform in Thai history.

This education reform to be implemented between 1996 and 2007 involves four main areas: school, curriculum, teacher and administrative reform. Its main concern is that learners have the ability to learn and develop. Learners are the most important component and life-long learning must be encouraged. A twelve-year basic education will be provided free to all Thai students. In 2005, there will be an Office of Quality Assurance, whose task is to oversee the quality control of education at every level and in every aspect. Schools are to be given more autonomy. There will be greater involvement by families and local communities in school policy and administration. An independent and learner-centered approach is a must, and analytical learning instead of rote learning will be incorporated. Teacher education will also be a focus. Teachers will have to undertake research and develop teaching abilities as well.

With the importance of English as a world language and the changes that come with the National Education Act, plus the challenges of new technology, what follows will discuss the English language teaching and learning scenario in Thailand in this decade.

#### 1. More international programs

As of last year, there were 56 international schools around the country. There were three foreign colleges and universities in Thailand. In private Thai universities, there were 77 undergraduate, 30 graduate and five Ph.D curricula using English as the language of instruction. In governmental higher education institutions, there were 143 undergraduate, 205 graduate and 77 doctoral international programs in English which have been established either independently by Thai institutes or have links with overseas institutes. It is expected that most new programs to be opened in universities in the future will be international programs.

## 2. Changes in English teaching and learning in school

### 2.1 Curriculum change

In the new curriculum, English will be a compulsory foreign language subject starting from level 1 in primary education (6 years of age). It is one of the eight compulsory strands that students will have to take in the core and elective courses. It is to be divided into four levels. Level 1 (Preparatory Level) and 2 (Beginning Level) are in primary education; level 3 (Expanding Level) is in lower secondary education and level 4 (Expanding Level) is in upper – secondary education.

There are three objectives in either core or elective English courses. These are knowledge, skill, and positive attitude towards English. Knowledge involves how to use English language in communication, learning and understanding the culture of native speakers, knowing the differences between Thai and the English language, being able to use English to gain information in other subjects, being able to use English to do lifelong learning, to find pleasure and to use it in their work. Skill involves communication strategies, thinking skills, critical and creative thinking, self-evaluation, learning skills, knowledge seeking skills, technology skills and how to work with others. A positive attitude includes appreciating the English language and its culture.

There are various concepts incorporated in English language teaching and learning e.g. focus on learners and for communication. Communicative Approach is still used but with more focus on listening and speaking. Integrated, cooperative, holistic learning, content, task-based and problem-based learning are also applied.

Only descriptions of strand, standard (content and performance standard) and benchmark for each level are specified in the national curriculum. Teachers will have to write their own course materials with content related to real-life situations in the community. Credits can be transferred and students can also learn English outside of school (e.g. in language schools in Thailand or overseas).

### 2.2 Teacher development

Teacher development is a main concept in the education reform. Teachers will be offered continuous training with some form of training every two years. In English language teaching, there are several projects being set up for this purpose (e.g. INSET). INSET's objectives are to provide training for teachers in order to develop professionally and keep up with new teaching methodologies. Teachers have to improve their English proficiency. Training methods are in the form of cascade training. Another example of a teacher training project is the project run by Thai TESOL through the Royal Project on Distance Learning. This program is broadcast to schools especially in remote areas and on satellite TV.

## 3. Changes in English language teaching and learning in universities.

This year the Ministry of University Affairs has issued the reform of English language teaching and learning in Thai higher institutions. This reform has been done through the proposal for change made by the committee to plan for the development of the English curriculum in Thai universities. This proposal was made with the consensus of the heads of the English departments and coordinators of Foundation English courses. Changes are planned to be completed in four years. The following are the changes that will take place:

- 3.1 There will be only one set of English scores used to consider students entering the university, that is the English language scores from the English Proficiency Test of the Ministry of University Affairs.
- 3.2 Universities will use the scores from this test to place students according to their level of proficiency. Those who are weak will take a remedial course first with no credit. Those who have average proficiency will take the first

compulsory English course. If they come with higher proficiency, they will be placed in the second or third compulsory course and can take other advanced English courses to make up the required credits. A recommended score range to place student according to their level of proficiency was already made.

As for English major students, English Departments can decide whether or not students should take the same compulsory language course in the General Education Curriculum as students from other faculties.

- 3.3 University students who choose to take English as their language subject must take at least four compulsory English courses. Foundation courses 1 and 2 are integrated language skills and study skills courses; the others may be English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses as required by each major. Goals and standards of Foundation English courses 1 and 2 have already been proposed to use in writing a national curriculum for these courses in the near future.
- 3.4 Every university student will take a National English Proficiency Test before leaving the university. This is not an exit exam and students can take it at any time and any number of times. The results will show his/her proficiency in each skill. The results will not appear in the transcripts but can be used in employment applications and for further education in Thailand. Ground work for the National University English Proficiency Test has already been planned. Research has already been carried out to examine this test: its balance, systems, skills, modes and content areas. A committee will be set up to study international standardized tests in order to select the proper profile for this test. With the research results and the selective profile, another committee will be assigned to write test specifications and test items.

During these four years, sub-committees will be formed consisting of lecturers from both public and private universities in order to prepare for the above changes.

#### 4. More use of Self-Access Learning Centers and IT.

Self access learning centers (SALC) have been established in many schools and universities to facilitate learner independence. A plan has already been made for setting up a self-access learning center in 46 project schools all over the country. The objectives of setting up these SALC are:

1. to provide multi-media and learning facilities for the students to do further practice on language skills on their own in addition to what has been taught in the classroom according to individual needs, and interests.
2. to be a source of a variety of general knowledge which the students can integrate in the study of subject matter in the English language especially in listening and reading skills.
3. to be used as a tool for learner training in strategies of learning, how to learn which is hoped will lead to the formation of skills to know how to utilize all these processes for life-long education, so that students can continue the development of their work and quality of life. (Biyaem, 1997)

The self-access learning center is also being incorporated in English teaching and learning at the university. Next year, a national workshop on self-access learning will be conducted for Thai university staff to effectively set up and run their self-access centers.

In relation to IT, teachers both in schools and universities, are trained to write e-learning courses. The Internet is now commonly used in universities. Many university English courses require students to work on their own using computer programs both home-made and commercial. The committee to plan for the development of the English curriculum in Thai universities has assigned one university to produce web materials to be used as part of the English remedial course. At the moment, the Promotion of Science and Technology Association has set up a committee to design a web-based program in teaching English for Science and Technology. This course is to be in operation next year. University students as well as the general public can register for this 3-credit course. Apart from this, there are at least 25 ELT web-sites in Thailand available for internet users interested in improving their English. To bridge the gap until proper English proficiency is achieved, NECTEC in cooperation with the Japanese government has developed a translation program named "Prasit" to translate English to Thai and is in the process of producing a program to translate Thai to English.

#### 5. Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance is one of the most important factors in any teaching and learning program but it has not been fully practiced in the past. In this decade, the English language proficiency of Thais will be evaluated with National Standardized Tests to assure the quality of English language teaching and learning. One of the standardized tests is the National English Assessment test used in schools with students in grades 3, 6, 9 and 12. Another standardized test is the test given to students before leaving the university. The Standardized English Test that has been introduced in the workplace is the English test for tourist guides. With a national standardized test, it is hoped that the quality of English language learning will be more or less the same everywhere in the country.

The scenario that has been described cannot be accomplished with money alone, it also requires the dedication and collaboration of educators as well as the private sector and organizations of native speaker of English such as USIS, British Council, etc. It is hoped that by the end of this decade, Thais can effectively use English in business, science and technology. More importantly, Thais will be able to use English to promote Thailand and its culture.

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