

Teaching Wisdom of Award-Winning Teachers: A Case Study of Thai EFL Teachers

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Abstract

English language instruction in Thailand has left a lot to be desired; far too many university graduates cannot communicate successfully in English. The teaching experiences shared by the three award-winning Thai teachers of English at the university level revealed key considerations ranging from English language policy, classroom management, teaching approaches and methods to the roles of local English teachers. All of these pointed to the necessity and urgency of instilling in all stakeholders, especially the student, the increasingly important role of English in Thailand. More specifically, the three teachers' interview results suggested that dichotomizing issues revolving around English language instruction such as English only vs. both English and Thai as a medium of instruction; native or non-native English speaking teachers; teaching grammar explicitly or implicitly; and communicative language teaching vs. the grammar-translation teaching method, is not going to be conducive to expected learning outcomes on the part of the student. Rather, the teacher should begin to truly understand the learning situation or contingency he/she is engaged in. Only then should he/she think about further steps in the teaching procedure that would encourage the student to become confident in learning English.

Keywords: Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Dichotomy in Teaching, Local Situations

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ภูมิปัญญาการสอนของครูดีเด่นด้านการสอน: กรณีศึกษาครูชาวไทย ที่สอนภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษาต่างประเทศ

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บทคัดย่อ

การสอนภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทยกล่าวได้ว่าไม่ประสบความสำเร็จอย่างที่คาดหวังบัณฑิตไทยจำนวนมากไม่สามารถใช้ภาษาอังกฤษในการสื่อสารได้อย่างประสบความสำเร็จ ประสบการณ์การสอนของครูดีเด่นสามรายในงานวิจัยนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงประเด็นหลัก ๆ อาทิ นโยบาย ภาษาอังกฤษ การจัดการชั้นเรียน วิธีการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ บทบาทของครูภาษาอังกฤษในแต่ละบริบท ปัจจัยเหล่านี้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงความจำเป็นและความเร่งด่วนในการปลูกฝังความคิดให้กับผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียในเรื่องนี้ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งผู้เรียนเกี่ยวกับความสำคัญของภาษาอังกฤษที่มีเพิ่มมากขึ้นในประเทศไทย อาจกล่าวอย่างเฉพาะเจาะจงได้ว่า การสัมภาษณ์ครูดีเด่นสามรายข้างต้นเสนอแนะว่าการคิดเป็นชั่วโมงในหลากหลายประเด็นเกี่ยวกับการสอนภาษาอังกฤษนั้นจะไม่นำไปสู่ผลการเรียนรู้ที่คาดหวังได้ เช่นการคิดเป็นชั่วโมงในประเด็นที่เกี่ยวกับการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเท่านั้นหรือการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษปนกับภาษาไทยในการสอน ผู้สอนเป็นเจ้าของภาษาหรือครูชาวไทยดีกว่ากัน การสอนแบบเน้นการสื่อสารหรือการสอนแบบเน้นไวยากรณ์และการแปล แต่สิ่งที่ครูควรกระทำก็คือเริ่มด้วยการสร้างความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับสถานการณ์และสภาพการณ์ของตนให้ถ่องแท้ ก็ต่อเมื่อเกิดความเข้าใจในบริบทของตน ครูจึงจะดำเนินการในขั้นต่อไปในการสอน ซึ่งควรจะมีมุ่งเน้นการทำให้ผู้เรียนเกิดความมั่นใจในการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ

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“The role of the teacher has been a perennial topic of discussion in the field of general education as well as in language education. Unable to precisely pin down the role and function of the teacher, the teaching professional has grappled with a multitude of metaphors. The teacher has been variously referred to as an artist and an architect; a scientist and a psychologist; a manager and a mentor; a controller and a counselor; a sage on the stage; a guide on the side; and more. There is merit in each of these metaphors. Each of them captures the teacher’s role partially, but none of them fully.” . . . [Dr. B. Kumaravadivelu, Professor of Applied Linguistics and TESOL, San Jose State University, USA, 2003, p. 7]

In recent years, the quality of English language instruction in the Kingdom of Thailand has taken on greater importance than ever. The January 2015 operationalization of the ASEAN Economic Community (“AEC”), in which English has been adopted as the working language, has underscored the criticality of ensuring that Thai educational institutions employed the most effective techniques and pedagogies to maximize Thai students’ proficiency in English, notably speaking and writing. In this connection, discussions were underway in both academic institutions and government ministries concerning the best approaches to English language instruction. Of particular interest were the teaching approaches of non-native English speakers (NNES) who constituted a majority of the English language instructors in the country, but whose instructional philosophies remained largely unknown and under-investigated. Consequently, relatively little was known about the best practices of those NNES who had achieved acclaim as particularly effective English language instructors.

In this case, three award-winning Thai instructors of English language at three different government-run universities are showcased, with a view to illuminating the elements that account for their extraordinary level of effectiveness. Insights gleaned from their approaches to English language instruction might be suggestive of how the effectiveness of others’ instruction could be enhanced.

The three extraordinarily effective teachers, as indicated by their teaching awards, are: Dr. Pornapa Krairit (School of Language and Communication, National Institute of Development Administration); Dr. Pavan Thira (Chulalongkorn University's Language Institute); and Dr. Saengdara Thongaram (Thammasat University's Faculty of Liberal Arts). Dr. Pornapa, who taught English courses for 22 years before taking early retirement some 10 years ago, received a teaching excellence award in 2000. Dr. Pavan is a veteran of English language instruction, whose teaching skills were acknowledged with the "Excellence Teaching Award" in 2008. Dr. Saengdara has spent 18 years developing the skills of Thai students in the intricacies of the English language. Individually and collectively, they represent perhaps the pinnacle of excellence in English language instruction in Thailand.

English Language Instruction in Thailand—An Enduring Challenge

Since the promulgation of the first Compulsory Education Act in 1921 requiring that English be studied from Grade 5, English had been taught as a foreign language, in Thai schools, nationwide, although students were not required to speak it on a daily basis (Durongphan et al., cited in Darasawang and Watson Todd, 2012, p. 2). Nevertheless, after nearly a century of mandatory English language instruction, the national endeavor to impart skill in English language usage remained laden with considerable problems, chief among which was the continued dismal proficiency in use of the language. One significant explanation for this continuing problem was the reaffirmation by language experts that those who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) were at a disadvantage right from the start (Doughty and Williams, 1998). More specifically, even the most dedicated EFL learners usually received only 1,200 hours of exposure to English, whereas an American child growing up speaking English would receive approximately 8,400 hours by the time he/she is 4 years old – the overall implication being that the typical EFL student was usually in an "input-poor" environment, thereby preventing him/her from being communicatively competent in the language.

Another phenomenon contributing to the lack of satisfactory results from English language instruction was the plethora of “cram” or tutoring schools that had sprung up since the advent of compulsory English language instruction. It was believed that a number of Thai students grew up suffused in an environment of tutoring or cram schools, convinced that their futures hinged on perfect university entrance examination scores and preternatural grade-point averages. Although very popular among the middle-class parents and students, the cram schools were frowned upon by authorities in the Ministry of Education, because of the belief that such schools obliterated the very principles of education. That is, the schools were deemed to be “teaching” to the test only, and therefore not really teaching at all, but rather *tutoring*.¹

Yet, despite what some educational experts viewed as a “dishearteningly bleak picture” of English language teaching in Thailand, there was no denying the fact that English instruction was very important, and, if anything, becoming more so. Indeed, as pointed out by a number of applied linguists and language educators (e.g., Darasawang and Watson Todd, 2012; Masavisut et al. 1986; Saengboon, 2013 and Wongsathorn et al., 1996), knowledge in virtually all fields was available in English, even when in some instances the original contributions were made in a language other than English (e.g., Russian, or French, or Mandarin). As the world’s *de facto lingua franca* since the height of the British empire and the later rise of its American replacement, English had long since become *primus inter pares* among the world’s major languages.² The implications were clear: If Thailand was to remain economically, educationally, socially and technologically competitive, it must make certain that proper English lessons were given to Thai students and that the students gained greater facility in actually *using* the language.

Moreover, the advent of the AEC would make it all the more important for a larger number of Thais to be able to communicate effectively in English (Baker, 2012). Notwithstanding this importance, the proficiency of Thai students to communicate in English was somewhat low, as reported in the mass media and as seen in the results of the English papers in Thailand’s national examinations (Draper, 2012, among others).

This rather pronounced disconnect between *the need for* English language proficiency *versus the actual extent of* such proficiency was increasingly a problem of concern to authorities concerned, including parents, students and Thai applied linguists and language educators. As they grappled with the reasons behind the inability of Thai students to communicate well in English, the linguists and educators surmised that there were a number of attributions. The reasons ranged from students' lack of motivation, Thailand being an English-poor environment, lack of a need (perceived or real) for most Thais to speak English for work-related or personal objectives, and the failure of attempted reforms of English language teaching in Thailand (see next section below). On the latter issue, while English language policies implemented in Thai schools at different levels—whether primary, secondary or tertiary—had emphasized *the ability to communicate*, rather than to merely recite and regurgitate grammar rules during exam periods, there existed considerable gaps between policy and practice (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Simply stated, the reforms had not *reformed* English language teaching. For these reasons, English teaching in Thailand had been unable to live up to the expected standards.

Thailand's Current English Language Teaching Policies

In the attempt to remedy the situation, in May 2014, Thailand's Office of The Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education issued new guidelines to reform English language instruction in Thai schools. Specifically, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), mooted by the European Union (EU) in 2002 as the gauge for assessing foreign language competence, was adopted as the benchmark against which to measure Thai students' English language ability. The CEFR categorized foreign language users into three groups—namely, basic user, independent user, and proficiency user. The first is subcategorized as *breakthrough or beginner* (A1), and *waystage or elementary* (A2); the second, as *threshold or intermediate* (B1), and *vantage or upperintermediate* (B2); and, the third as *effective operational proficiency or advanced* (C1) and *mastery or proficiency* (C2). In a nutshell, this latest policy of English language instruction aimed at enabling Thai students to be communicatively competent in English.

However, it should be noted that pre-2014 English language policies had more or less the same lofty goals of turning Thai students into English-speaking professionals. For example, in the National Education Act of 1999, it was mentioned that standards for foreign language learning (including English) at the secondary level were to strive to meet the following goals: communication, culture, connection and community. Specifically, communication referred to fluency in foreign languages; culture referred to knowledge and understanding of the target language culture and its influence on Thai culture; connection referred to the marriage of foreign language with the content of other subjects; and community referred to the applicability of foreign language knowledge to the real world (Darasawang and Watson Todd, 2012).

At tertiary level, the English language policy was set by each university, but the ultimate goal was for graduates to be able to communicate in English. There was no policy that suggested that grammatical accuracy was more important than the other aspects of English language learning.

Competing Views on How English Is “Best” Taught

Over the past three decades, the communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT) had been considered most effective as a language teaching approach.

According to Nunan (1989),

Communicative language teaching views language as a system for the expression of meaning. Activities involve oral communication, carrying out meaningful tasks, and using language which is meaningful to the learner. Objectives reflect the needs of the learners; they include functional skills as well as linguistic objectives. The learner’s role is as a negotiator and interactor. The teacher’s role is as a facilitator of the communication process. Materials promote communicative language use; they are task-based and authentic.

Based on the tenets of CLT above, the prevalent belief was that language is for communication. To study a second language successfully, one should study it not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to a communicative end. This argument lent strong support to not only language teaching but also language testing. That is, classroom teaching should be student-centered in the sense that they can take charge of their own learning. Language testing should not focus on grammar and vocabulary in isolation; appropriate contexts or scenarios of language in use must be provided to make the lesson and the test “authentic.” Teaching grammar explicitly appears to be frowned upon by CLT staunch advocates. Regurgitating grammar rules on an English test was to be avoided at all costs. In brief, CLT strongly argued for a major overhaul of English language teaching around the globe, especially in non-English speaking countries such as Thailand, which had long been subjected to the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism, the two traditional teaching methods.

As a theory and an approach, CLT seemed practical, but one of the chronic problems in English teaching in Thailand was that the majority of Thai students were still unable to communicate satisfactorily once they left school. Worse yet, their scores on standardized tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC did not fare better than those obtained by some other neighboring countries. This hard evidence worried Thai educators, parents and employers because of the concern that younger generations of Thais would not be able to compete successfully with their counterparts from the ASEAN community. Additionally, being unable to communicate satisfactorily in English could make them less competitive once they entered the work world.

Given continued mediocrity in terms of their English proficiency despite the purported inclusion of CLT in the classroom, many Thai teachers of English were beginning to cast doubt on an over-reliance on CLT. Some had even gone so far as to claim that the traditional methods of teaching (e.g., grammar-translation and audiolingualism) should be brought back. Indeed, this dichotomous thinking about whether to use CLT or traditional methods was a cause for real concern.

The Role of Thai Teachers of English in Class

Apart from English instruction in the increasing number of international schools in the larger urban areas, Thai teachers, rather than English native-speaking teachers, did most of the English language teaching. At the primary level, these teachers usually had a bachelor's degree in English or English language instruction from various universities and teachers' colleges. A perennial complaint was that in some cases the teachers were not qualified because they were assigned to teach English even if they had graduated in other areas of expertise. Certainly, this was a problem faced by many schools in rural areas.

At the secondary level, the situation was more or less the same, although the teachers could teach English only if they received their degrees in English or English language instruction. Finally, at the tertiary level, teachers were equipped with either a master's or a doctoral degree in English, applied linguistics or a related field. With many of these teachers having earned their advanced degree from English-speaking countries, such as the UK and the USA, the general perception was that these teachers likely had a higher level of proficiency in English than their counterparts at the lower levels.³

Despite the very mixed picture concerning the quality and results of English language instruction, especially at the primary and secondary levels, the situation had not been one of unalloyed disappointment and failure. In fact, there had been those English language teachers who over the years had achieved widely acclaimed success in leading their students to high levels of proficiency in English. Their approaches, and the underlying philosophies, were potentially instructive.

Profiles in Excellence: Award-Winning English Language Instructors

Applied linguists were in agreement that of all the factors that influence success in English language instruction, *the teacher* played a pivotal role. According to Farrell (2015, p. 83), effective teachers, also dubbed expert teachers, shared the following overall characteristics: "they must have a larger knowledge-base from which to draw and usually they organize knowledge more efficiently in complex

interconnected schemas and utilize it more effectively”. Farrell goes on to suggest that “. . . 21st century language teachers must be able to respond to every issue, dilemma and problem they face, thus moving beyond their initial craft skills and knowledge and be able to evaluate possible roads of action that take into account the needs of their students, their institution and their community”(p. 83). The three award-winning teachers presented below were found to possess those characteristics in abundance.

In the following section, each of the three teachers will be discussed, with respect to a) their individual approaches to English teaching; b) how they handled student boredom with learning the language; c) how they managed to create enthusiasm for mastering the language; d) how they viewed English language policy in relation to their teaching contexts; and, e) how they construed the effectiveness of NNES as compared with native English speaker instructors.

Dr. Pornapa Krairit: *Profile in “Sincerity, Passion, and Approachability”*

School of Language and Communication,
National Institute of Development Administration

Dr. Pornapa received her B.A. (Hons) from Chulalongkorn University’s Faculty of Arts, majoring in English and minoring in Philosophy. Before she entered this premier university, she was ranked 14th out of the 50 highest-scoring college-bound students in the nationwide university entrance examination. This practice was common during her time in high school. After graduation, she decided to study in the M.A. Program in English literature and a Ph.D. degree in teaching English as a Foreign language in USA. Subsequently, she returned to Thailand and began her teaching career at NIDA’s Language Center (former name of the School of Language and Communication, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA)).

A. Approaches to English Language Instruction

Dr. Pornapa averred that her teaching of English at NIDA followed the “mixed methods” approach in line with CLT, although she believed that CLT would be more appropriate for everyday English rather than academic English, her teaching staple. As she put it,

Really, when I taught my NIDA students, I believed that the language examples that they were required to read, which had been excerpted from authentic texts in their respective fields, were attesting to the CLT principles—that of authentic and real materials. I definitely used CLT, but I began with sentence analysis (which should be considered in line with CLT). Sentence analysis is absolutely necessary if my students want to read academic texts with better understanding. In analyzing sentences, my students needed to pay close attention to all those elements in the sentences. This is how they should learn English. This is how they could begin to appreciate how English works. This kind of knowledge, once acquired, would stay with them after they leave school. And I believe this is consistent with the CLT principles. At any rate, I’d like to point out that what I did in class in terms of teaching approaches was to use mixed methods or approaches as I deemed relevant.

Dr. Pornapa also pointed out that at the graduate level, students needed to use English for reading academic texts and journal articles, which required them to read with care and understanding and analyze sentence structures. She said,

You see, . . . NIDA students were required to read textbooks and journal articles and reports. This means that they would need to read long and complicated sentences. Sometimes, they even had to translate the English texts or articles into Thai for their presentation assignments. Certainly, listening and speaking in English were not of their concern, but they had to read and translate into

English. Therefore, they first needed to understand the structures of complicated sentences. The thing is, oftentimes, English sentences they found in the readings assigned tended to be long and complicated...you know...like compound-complex sentences which could run up to three or four lines. What amazed me was that most, if not all, students I had said that they had not been systematically taught those sentence elements—headwords and modifiers; therefore, when they read they could not parse sentences correctly. I had to start anew with all those basic things they should have already known!

In terms of teaching materials, Dr. Pornapa explained that the text was teacher-made and contained sentences, vocabulary, paragraphs and long passages, the contents of which reflected the students' field of study, e.g., human resource development, public administration, development economics and social development. They were collected from materials found in the library or from the Internet. She further elaborated,

The sentences, vocabulary items, paragraphs and long passages were "authentic." This is important because they were what they had to be able to read in their programs of study. So the very first thing I told them in class was to make them aware of this fact. This is to make sure that they realized the relevancy of the course to their immediate needs in the program. Call this CLT or otherwise I'm not really concerned about. But I do know that reading this kind of stuff was good for them. I believe that proper understanding of sentence elements and paragraphs served as building blocks for them to develop English proficiency, especially reading and writing.

Another important aspect that made my class a success was that I painstakingly led them through the grammar "garden." While walking down together with them in the garden, I particularly

asked each one of them to read the sentences closely and analyze their elements together. Of course, many of them made mistakes in their attempts, but I considered them a natural part of learning. Once I commented on the mistakes made, they seemed to understand the reasons until they reached the “Ah, I see” moment. That was most important, in my opinion. They could learn from their mistakes.

B. How to Handle Boredom with Learning the Language

Although it was widely known that boredom can set in very easily when it comes to learning English, especially in a country where English is not used on a daily basis like Thailand, Dr. Pornapa managed to handle boredom successfully. She said,

In order to motivate my students, I often included the culture of the English language in my teaching. I had spent a number of years doing my master’s and doctoral degrees in an American university. So I had a chance to learn about American culture and I shared it with them. They appeared interested and began to realize that the English language was not just about grammar and vocabulary. One other thing I did was to ask them to imagine the tendency of today’s organizations that would increasingly require people with a good command of English. I said, for example, if you applied for a job that required good English, what would you do if your English did not live up to the company’s expectation?

Additionally, I also gave my telephone number and office hours and encouraged them to contact me whenever they needed help with English. I think they could detect my sincerity and eagerness to help them with the English language. They began to trust me. Trust is so important. If you as a teacher could earn trust from your students, it would be as if you won the battle already. The teacher must be willing to be approachable.

C. How to Create Enthusiasm for Mastering the Language

What I did to make my students enthusiastic about learning English was to drum into them this message that English was very important for their generation and future careers. While this may sound mundane, it was what I did the first time I met them in class. Normally, students tended to think about learning English as a drudgery, something to be avoided. But as a teacher I had to show them my enthusiasm, my passion to teach first. You see, . . . they were adult students, they were mature enough to tell whether their teacher was passionate about teaching or not. I firmly believed that passion could very well be contagious. I encouraged them to seek as much English input as they could. For example, I said to one of my classes that “if while walking along the street, you stumbled upon a piece of paper with English letters, you should pick it up and read it.” While this might sound exaggerating, it was a first habit that one must have if he/she wants to be successful in learning language, English or any other language. You must constantly seek out good quality input to keep your linguistic health strong.

D. Views on English Language Policy

Like the other three teachers, Dr. Pornapa believed that the English language policy was reasonable because it focused on English use in everyday life rather than on grammar rules in isolation. As she put it,

The English language policy, which followed the CLT principles, was fine. But what should be of concern was the implementation of the CLT-based policy, because many Thai teachers may have different interpretations of CLT. That’s where the problem lay. After all, when you teach English, you’ll need to focus on all aspects of the language. And at the same time,

you'll have to consider immediate needs and wants of the students you have. In my case, my students wanted to be able to read academic materials; focusing on sentence elements, vocabulary items and paragraphs and long passages was quite relevant. If I were to focus on listening and speaking, that would not help them read successfully. It's going to be a waste of time for both the students and myself. Whatever the policy is, you as a classroom teacher must get real and stay focused on what you'll need to accomplish—of course, referring to the course description and syllabus would always be safe.

E. Views on the Effectiveness of NNES as Compared with Native English Speaker Instructors

I think if we have a native English-speaking teacher teach the reading class, he/she might be unable to fathom why Thai students can't read well enough. The teacher might have to grope in the dark trying to figure out where the reading problems lie. However, if you've a qualified Thai teacher of English teaching the class, he/she might be more familiar with the students, especially the kinds of problems they usually have in learning English generally. Building a strong reading ability among Thai students should be the job of local Thai teachers who have proven to be qualified. Besides, Thai teachers can always understand and speak Thai, which is important because students who are weak in English will not be able to . . . or feel confident enough to ask questions in English. Having Thai teachers will help them feel that they can speak Thai with them and that serves as a stepping stone for their next learning levels. Come to think of it, English native-speaking teachers should be put in an advanced class where students feel

comfortable enough hearing and speaking the language. So it's matter of putting the right man to the right job.

Dr. Pavan Thira: Profile in “Enthusiasm, Caringness, and Histrionics”

Language Institute, Chulalongkorn University

Dr. Pavan received her BA (Hons) from Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Arts. She had spent a number of years studying in Germany in the early 1970s because of her father's stint there. Thus, she had been exposed to international education during the time when international education in Thailand was just beginning. After she had returned to Bangkok and enrolled in one of the most renowned demonstration schools in Bangkok, Pathumwan Demonstration School, she passed a rigorous entrance examination with flying colors and secured a seat in the Faculty of Arts, arguably the best place to study the humanities in Thailand. After graduation she became a lecturer of English at CULI in the mid 1980's, a post she has held until now.

While teaching at CULI, she was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to pursue her master's degree in English language teaching at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where she also did her Ph.D., while teaching German as a teaching assistant. Her colleagues at CULI consider her one of the best teachers there. In fact, her excellent teaching performance culminated in the “Excellence in Teaching Award” from Chulalongkorn University, a testament to her dedication and passion for teaching. At CULI, she taught the integrated skills of English course to undergraduate students, entitled experiential learning. In addition, she supervised Ph.D. and M.A. theses in English linguistics and taught in an advanced program of study called “English as an International Language” (EIL).

A. Approaches to English Language Instruction

When it came to teaching approaches, Dr. Pavan made it clear at the outset that English should be taught in a way that reflects how the language is or should be used for communication. English was not an object to be analyzed as much as a vehicle for communication in today's increasingly globalized world. Knowledge and

understanding emerge out of direct experience in using the language, hence the experiential learning title of the course she taught.

The teaching approach that Dr. Pavan followed was the communicative approach or CLT as described above. What she did in her classes was to speak only English; the students were prohibited from speaking Thai. This was in stark contrast to the classes taught by Dr. Pornapa, in which Thai was used entirely in the teaching. One of the reasons for this distinct contrast had to do with the nature of the two courses: the one taught by Dr. Pornapa was strictly academic English, focusing on reading skills development, whereas the one taught by Dr. Pavan was an integration of the four skills of English, thus making it possible to engage students in English listening and speaking. The importance and urgency of speaking English when teaching were echoed in the following:

The teacher must speak English when teaching classes, although most of the students were not accustomed to it at first. I see no reason why the teacher should speak Thai. If you were to speak Thai in the English class, you would deprive students of the opportunity to engage themselves in English. But certainly you'll have to be patient. Students differ from one another; some students are risk-takers, willing to experiment with the English language. They are not intimidated by the correction made to their mistakes. But then some other students are more cautious or I would say . . . a bit bashful. They need more time and encouragement. You know . . . sometimes you'll have to give a pep talk to cheer them up. But whatever it takes, you as a teacher cannot use Thai as an excuse.

We also have to remember that when students begin to speak English, they are likely to make mistakes. The challenge is whether to correct those mistakes right away. For me . . . I tend to ignore those mistakes if I can still understand the messages. So it's more of a strategic plan. As a teacher you'll have to weigh the

pros and cons of corrective feedback. If the teacher overdoes it, it will backfire; but if no mistakes have ever been corrected, then students may not learn from them.

B. How to Handle Boredom with Learning the Language

To help students avoid boredom in the lessons, I used various tasks in which they were required to interact with one another actively. The text used was also facilitative because students had to exchange ideas and discuss ways to solve problems in the text. The text revolves around issues that are pertinent to their everyday lives such as the environment, social problems, etc. This way they could see the connections between the English language and their lives. So basically, the students had no time left for boredom because of the highly interactive nature of the class. Further, I believe, while conducting class, I was very enthusiastic myself. You see . . . students sometimes could feel whether their teacher was willing, or happy to teach. My thought is that teaching is like acting . . . after all, what the teacher does is to have “interpersonal” interaction with young minds. The very fact that the teacher is so eager and willing to teach could help motivate students, I firmly believe.

C. How to Create Enthusiasm for Mastering the Language

Like I said earlier, teacher’s passion and eagerness shown during teaching are the best thing. For students to become enthusiastic, I first began by being very careful in speaking English myself. I think the students wanted their teacher to be a role model. If you speak English well enough, students will feel that they are in good hands and that might help them to feel enthusiastic about the lessons. They want to come to class because of good teachers. Also, when my students made mistakes which they always did,

I was very cautious in giving them feedback, gradually pointing out to them the mistakes they had made. First, I thought to myself that I may have made the same mistakes when I was their age. Second, I assumed the role of a caring mother. This might sound pretentious, but I believed it was a useful strategy because students felt that you were approachable. In addition, I also put students into small groups so that they would be able to help one another. Sometimes students learned better when they were asked to do something together with a clear goal to achieve. In doing so, I made sure that more able students would work with less able friends. This would help both parties to learn from one another. It's sort of a community of learning, so to speak.

D. Views on English Language Policy

It's hard to say whether the English language policy is reasonable or not. On the one hand, over the past three decades, the English policy which followed the communicative fashion should address long-standing problems we've had, which is low proficiency in English among Thais. On the other hand, today's students don't necessarily fare better than previous generations who had been taught through traditional methods such as grammar-translation and audio-lingualism. Perhaps, we'll have to look at other factors such as individual differences. You know, . . . some are better than others in learning things. But then if the policy should aim at students in general, then the kind of policy that strictly follows western standards may not be the only answer or the final answer. To me, the policy concerning foreign language education should be one that reflects real needs of Thai people when they graduate. And that seems clear, right? . . . To be able to function in English. But then again, Thailand is a country that does not require people to speak English. That may be the root cause of the problem.

E. Views on the Effectiveness of NNES as Compared with Native English Speaker Instructors

I think I'm familiar with this question. Personally, I don't think we should dichotomize between native and non-native teachers. Both could be equally good or equally bad, depending on the kind of teacher you have and how the person teaches. In fact, I've come across many good Thai teachers, some of whom are actually my colleagues at CULI. All these friends share some common characteristics. They are knowledgeable. Their English is good. They are willing to teach. They are on time. Some may have native-like proficiency, but even those who may not speak native English still do a very good job of teaching. They could inspire their students. Perhaps, if you've a Thai teacher whose English is extremely good, that might give you an edge because that teacher could use both Thai and English to help students understand the lessons faster. But I still prefer the Thai teacher to speak English in class.

Dr. Saengdara Thongaram: Profile in “Showing Concern and Helpfulness”

Faculty of Liberal Arts

Thammasat University

Dr. Saengdara Thongaram, a recipient of research awards and an excellence in Teaching award, received her B.Ed. in English Teaching from Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Education, an M.A. in English for Specific Purposes from Mahidol University's Faculty of Science, and a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. Dr. Saengdara was known in the English teaching circle in Thailand as a person keen on research into English teaching, especially writing. Additionally, she had been recognized as a successful teacher of English at Thammasat University, a position she had held for 18 years now.⁴

A. Approaches to English Language Instruction

I believe that in learning how to write in English, my Thai students should profit the most from the experience if I include “Thainess,” such as writing prompts about Thai culture and society in the writing activities assigned.

As far as I’m concerned, I used CLT in teaching writing. In teaching writing, I firmly believed that students should not be overly concerned about grammatical accuracy in the first few attempts. Rather, I encouraged them to write freely in order to generate ideas. Once they could come up with ideas, the meat of the writing task, they could just fix the grammar later. That’s how I would say that I followed the CLT principle that meaning should override grammatical accuracy. Further, in correcting grammatical mistakes found in their writing, I gradually encouraged them to consider those mistakes themselves first and then I taught the grammar points concerned to help them understand the nature of the mistakes.

The language I used in teaching writing was Thai. If I were to use English only, most, if not all, of the students would be lost. The point is not about the teacher speaking English or Thai; the point is about whether my students could see the purpose of the writing class. That is, writing is thinking. I wanted them to think through and in the language rather than becoming obsessed with perfect grammar. So basically, I used the Thai style CLT. You see, . . . the teacher spoke Thai, but the message was for them to see how English worked and how to put their thoughts in Thai into good English. Moreover, the students got to talk to each other, trying to figure out the structure of the assignment and also to help each other solve some grammar and vocabulary problems they had.

B. How to Handle Boredom with Learning the Language

In dealing with boredom in my writing class, I thought the use of topics that were directly related to Thai culture and society should help them to feel confident because they were going to write about something they could have a say about. This coupled with the fact that I never picked on their grammar. I just zeroed in on the contents and the logic behind their arguments in writing. I can tell that many students felt very comfortable in my class. They knew that I was there not because I wanted to pick on them and their writing but because I wanted to help them. You see, . . . once the students trusted you, anything would be possible. Again, let me emphasize that writing is thinking. I simply drummed into them that they shouldn't be worried about grammar in their first draft but instead should focus on the organization of ideas . . . you know, the logical connection. I also told them that effective writing doesn't occur overnight. That is, they must read good quality English a lot, and then over time they should have accumulated enough grammar and vocabulary to help them write effectively.

I guess my personality had something to do with the atmosphere in class. I acted as if I were their mother. This is the Thai style of being a good teacher. You showed your concern, care and willingness to help out. You know, . . . students can tell right away . . . whether you care or not. To me, teaching is not just about content or subject matter, but teaching should be holistic; you pay close attention to your students.

C. How to Create Enthusiasm for Mastering the Language

I'm convinced that my students were very enthusiastic in my writing class. The first reason for this has to do with the fact that the writing prompts were relevant to them. They were university students, and wanted to write about social issues. What I did was

to brainstorm with them about topics to write about. Moreover, in terms of providing corrective feedback on their writing, I did not intimidate them with red ink, but instead asked them to go through the mistakes they made together in class. I alternated the students' writing so that the whole class would learn from their peers' mistakes. Psychologically speaking, the whole class correction made them feel that "I'm not alone in making such and such mistakes" and that "Oh, there're certain parts that I could do well, not just bad ones." In-concert correction like this is what I considered student-centered, a key component of CLT. This is how they stayed enthusiastic.

D. Views on English language policy

As regards the English language policy, the focus on communicative use of English is just fine. Students should learn the kind of English that would help them communicate with others successfully. Over-emphasis on grammatical accuracy is a no-no. One other thing is I usually told my students that they didn't have to worry if their English did not sound like British or American English. I believed in the concept of "global Englishes" or "world Englishes." Correct English should not be confined to the traditional ones: American and English. I don't know if our current English language policy touched on this. Other than this aspect, the current policy sounds fine to me. The challenge is whether the policy has been implemented evenly in all schools and colleges throughout the country. Sometimes the implementation may not be successful because the teacher may not have the right understanding of it or of how English language teaching should be conducted to meet students' needs and wants. For example, aspects of English should be taught for communicative purposes, but I doubted whether they have been taught in such manner. The format of high-stakes tests

such as the entrance examination is an important consideration as well.

E. Views on the Effectiveness of NNES as Compared with Native English Speaker Instructors

As for teaching writing to Thai students, I proposed that qualified NNES would do the job well, and we should put the native speaker teacher for an advanced class. When learning how to write in English, beginning students should feel more at ease if they have NNES teaching them. They know that they could rely on their teachers who know both Thai and English when it comes to the use of expressions or word choices. A qualified NNES will be more relevant. But if we could find a native speaker who knows Thai as well, that'll be beneficial to the students, too. You see, . . . it's not just the nationality; it's more a matter of whether the teacher has enough knowledge and knows how to teach. That's more important. Why do we have to dichotomize? We'd better put the right person in the right condition.

Diverse Approaches to Achieving Excellence in English Language Instruction

The ideas of the three awarding-winning teachers discussed above give us both opportunities and challenges in English language instruction in Thai universities. While a sweeping generalization is impractical given the scope of this case study, the three teachers' beliefs and thoughts about how best to teach English at the university level have the following implications. First, CLT, the western-conceived approach to teaching, gives Thai students and the teacher opportunities to explore how English works in contexts, what kind of teaching strategies should be employed and the role of classroom management. However, with opportunities come challenges, especially as regards certain SLA theories such as the *comprehensible input hypothesis*, which entirely ignores the role of explicit grammar teaching. Dr. Pornapa

exemplifies effective grammar teaching in her instructional context, academic English, which requires students to analyze sentence structures and also necessitates direct grammar instruction. This suggests that the comprehensible input hypothesis lacks explanatory power that satisfactorily explains effective English teaching in different instruction contexts. This dichotomous and one-size-fits-all hypothesis is not practical.

Further, the teacher's passion and willingness to teach appears to be prominent. This non-linguistic factor opens up more opportunities for both the teacher and students to teach and learn English. For each of the awarding-winning English instructors in this case, the students viewed the teacher's passion and kindness very important. Extant second language acquisition and learning literature might pay more attention to the issue of teaching styles and strategies rather than just learning styles and strategies. The incorporation of the former will push the edge of knowledge in ESL/EFL teaching.

The manner in which feedback is or should be given is mentioned in this study. This corroborates existing research in SLA concerning the role of feedback in the ESL/EFL classroom. That is, feedback when given judiciously, helps rather than hurts.

The three award-winning teachers did ordinary things in their respective teaching performances. But they did them with passion and sincerity, sharing the same ultimate goal: developing in their students positive attitudes toward English. They perceived learning as incremental. They were not concerned about the end product of student learning: outstanding results, passing exams with flying colors. Rather, they paid close attention to day-to-day classroom teaching; they attempted to engage their students in every class meeting. And, in turn, they received satisfaction in teaching as a result of their dedication. In brief, they appeared to have received "teaching excellence awards" every time they taught their students, many of whom may have been lackluster in their English ability. So, it is no exaggeration to claim that the awards they were officially given truly attested to their excellent teaching performances.

Endnotes

- ¹ This case study does not focus on cram schools, yet this educational ‘innovation’ seems to suggest that regular education programs have not been successful. An argument for this failure is that teachers teach perfunctorily.
- ² This had become a truism, despite the fact that the number of native speakers of various versions of “Chinese” (approximately 1.3 billion) and Spanish (approximately 445 million) far outnumbered English speakers (approximately 375 million).
- ³ Another noteworthy characteristics of English language instruction in Thailand is the mushrooming of private tutoring schools of English in major cities such as Bangkok. English private tutoring aims to prepare college-bound students for the annual entrance examination in which the English paper is of great importance. The teaching of English in these tutoring schools follows the English examination format. This implies that tutors will do whatever it takes for their students to pass the examination. Whether their teaching methods will be in line with CLT tenets is not considered; what is important is to get as many students as possible to universities of their choices. This special teaching category will not be considered in my case here, although it might provide useful information about English language instruction in Thailand.
- ⁴ I decided to invite her to serve as a research participant in this case study because I realized that she herself has always been a staunch advocate of incorporating Thainess into English so that her Thai students will come to appreciate how close English is to their lives.

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