

Revisiting English Learning in Thai Schools:

Why Learners Matter

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Abstract

Given the increased prominence of English as a language for international communication, a question arises whether to what extent Thai school students are equipped with adequate English proficiency to be viable and intelligible in their actual use of English. In this paper, instead of simply calling attention to new English teaching methods and possibly unique types of teachers, the writer argues that what may be in need concerns the ways learners of English are perceived and the way English learning is understood. It is therefore suggested that learners who are at the core of learning be heard comprehensively. Based on learners' needs and interests, opportunities and insights to help Thai school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to better develop their English skills can be had.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, EFL learners, perceptions, student voice, Thai schools

Introduction

English is regarded as the most distinguished foreign language in Thailand and the significance attributed to it affects the learning of the language profoundly. English education has recently become an issue of public debate as it is believed that it is timely that Thai learners be more proficient English users after having studied it for more than 10 years from kindergarten to high school and even until university. The main responsibility for ensuring that the learners can be capable English users inevitably lies within the authority of the Ministry of Education of Thailand where so far various efforts have been made to improve English language administration in Thai schools. Despite these efforts, there remain issues at school level that seem to hinder the improvement of English language provision, which will be explored. First, an overview of how English is characterized in Thailand is presented.

Overview of English in Thailand

English has long been viewed as pivotal to the development of Thailand in terms of business, education, science, and technological headway, all of which require proficiency in English. In fact, English has been a compulsory element of the national education curriculum for decades. English has been included in the national education curriculum since 1980. In 2001, it was declared in the new national curriculum that English would be a compulsory foreign language subject starting from level 1 in primary education (from 6 years of age). English is also one of the eight compulsory components that Thai students have to take in the core and elective courses. Generally speaking, the study of English in Thai schools is divided into four levels: level 1 (preparatory level) and level 2 (beginning level) in primary education; level 3 (expanding level) in lower secondary education and level 4 (expanding level) in upper-secondary education.

Officially, English is a foreign language equivalent to French, German, Chinese, and Japanese. However, English is clearly accorded the highest status and value (Boonkit, 2002). It has also been described as “the essence of being an educated and cultured Thai” (Wongsothorn, 2000: 314).

In some urban and suburban areas where there is a high level of social and economic activity, English has been accepted and recognized in society as a language of communication and interaction (Crystal, 1995). In other parts of the country, English is seen more as of value for international relations and economic and academic purposes.

English is inexorably present in all professions (Kirkpatrick, 2012) throughout Asia including Thailand. It is widely employed in the media and various forms of publication in English for both academic and non-academic purposes are largely available around the country. The language is extensively used in newspapers, broadcasting and in the entertainment business (Pennycook, 1994). With recent development of information, communication and technology (ICT), English is also easily accessible through the Internet. In other words, throughout the country, Thai EFL learners of different ages can access English through one means or another.

Issues in English Education

Regarding English language teaching practice, educational reforms which have recently taken place have brought about policies regarding education. These include the leeway of compulsory education from six to nine years, the transfer of a highly centralized system of administration and curriculum to school level,

and a shift from a teacher-centered approach to student-centered education (Thamraksa, 2003). Since then, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which focuses more on learners than teachers as the center of learning, has played a more important role particularly in the area of English language teaching. On the one hand, it is claimed that through this methodology, Thai teachers of English are adopting the learner-centered approach and that this is favored by English teachers in Thailand (Chayanuvat, 1997). On the other hand, Kirtikara (2003) states that the English curriculum for the most part still focuses on grammar and reading comprehension and that students and learners' goals are overall guided by grammar-centric exams.

Whereas the demand for English is high with its greater role in Thai society, however, the standard of English teaching and learning at Thai primary and secondary schools has been broadly critiqued. Noom-ura (2013) found unsatisfactory outcomes when considering student achievement in English at years 6, 9, and 12.

What could account for such a consequence in Thai student learning achievement standard in English? Firstly, over the years, learners' achievement in English in national examinations is inevitably compared with their achievement in other subjects, and it is perceived to be at an unsatisfactory level. Secondly, there is an issue of disparity in the levels of proficiency among learners according to their socio-economic status, and between learners in rural and urban schools. Therefore, this creates an imbalance in the distribution of English proficiency among learners in the country. Thirdly, of wider concern, most Thai graduates are perceived as lacking command of the English language. Results of national entrance English tests in the past few years reflect Thai students' inadequate English skills, with scores as low as 30-40 out of 100 and that the poor outcomes could impact the country's forte in the regional market (O-NET report, 2016).

However, to entirely purport that the standard of English in Thailand has declined seems rather excessive. In fact, in the present system of education, English is a compulsory or a core subject in both Thai primary and secondary schools. In other words, the language is accessible to all learners across the country. Currently, English is more widespread and at large more Thais are better able to use English for general communication. Therefore, the issue of the standard of English in the country needs careful consideration prior to a claim that the standard has deteriorated.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that since the activity of learning English is pervaded with social and economic significance, the government needs to ensure that Thai students both in the urban and rural areas acquire an adequate level of proficiency in English. Particularly, this is because Thailand realizes that a

diversity and level of proficiency is required for participation in today's global community (Pica, 2000). It is therefore crucial that learners succeed in learning English both in the classroom and in actual use in life to enable the country to compete and participate in the twenty-first century knowledge-based economy.

Toward English Learning in Schools

There have so far been continual efforts on the part of the Ministry of Education to improve the standard of English in the country. Over the last decade different strategies have been adopted and various changes made in the system to improve the quality of English education at school level.

New teaching methods and techniques have been introduced. The use of information technology (IT) is advocated in schools across the country as part of the government's nationwide effort to elevate the overall standard of education. It is thought this might enhance the use of English and encourage learners in the learning process, at the same time providing teachers with more sophisticated teaching tools.

With these teaching innovations and tactics in support, however, schools' reactions have been varied as they seem to have different perspectives with reference to the issue of improving English.

Some teachers are reluctant to use IT in their English lessons. They may be older teachers who have difficulty catching up with technology, and thus willing to rejecting its integration into teaching. Moreover, some argue that what learners experience with IT would not be examined. In this respect, the main concern at school level is to ensure that learners are on track to pass English examinations. In fact, it has been acknowledged that overall the Thai education system can be considered as examination based or examination oriented (Wiriyachitra, 2002). As learners' performance in English has from the start been measured on the basis of their academic achievement or their cognitive ability, the effort at the school level seems more concentrated on improving English learning in the light of the examinations. This is partly because schools in general believe that they will be held accountable, as the examination results reflect teachers' effort and, more importantly, the effectiveness of schools (Wiriyachitra, 2002).

Different orientations schools may have toward improving English can also be attributed to the background of each school, and school leadership, for example, whether the heads of schools are in favor of promoting and using English. While it is acknowledged that there are other contributing factors influencing the way teachers and schools react to and implement the English language provision, the

core issue might lie in the way teachers, schools and even the Ministry of Education perceive and understand learners and English learning.

Perceptions of Learners and English Learning

In relation to learners' interest, which is a crucial force in determining whether learners embark on a task at all, it is suggested that learners be viewed from a more dynamic perspective with the possibility that it is the learning environment or even learners' psychological and emotional state which influences their perceived interest or lack of it.

The emphasis given to examinations has skewed the way learning English is perceived. While it is acknowledged that examinations are important for certain purposes, it should also be noted that examinations can be very limited and constraining as they do not provide a broad holistic framework for assessment (Goodwyn, 1995). However, the point is that this notion of examinations seems to have given school administrators, teachers and even learners the impression that the classroom is the most important context for language learning. Other contexts outside the classroom appear to be negligible to the learning of English. In reality, it is learning outside the classroom which is often perceived to be more productive (Brown, 2001).

The notion of examinations also appears to have impelled teachers to focus their teaching in the classroom in a way that implies learning English is solely an academic endeavor. This suggests that teachers perhaps perceive learning English in terms of individual learners embarking on the learning task in the classroom on their own through using their individual capacity, without any social element. As revealed by research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), this is a relatively narrow view of learning.

With the curriculum mandating what learners should learn and, more importantly, what learners will be evaluated in, teachers may also come to the conclusion that if learners follow their teaching closely, they would learn. In this sense, teachers believe in the notions of covering the syllabus and that teaching leads to learning. There indeed seems to be a belief within English education in Thailand that there is a direct relationship between teaching and learning. Teaching is perceived as diffusion, involving a one-way flow of knowledge and skills from the teacher to the learners. One example is the Ministry of Education's long endeavors to efficiently and systematically improve the English language teaching approach. By enhancing the use of English through proper schooling, learners would be influenced to have positive attitudes for learning the language, and by helping teachers to acquire the appropriate skills, and through introducing the use of

technology, it is assumed that teaching would be more efficient and thus this would result in better learning. This is in fact just a fallacious assumption. Inconsistent as this may be, what is most significant to note is that schools, teachers and Thai education policymakers perhaps have not fully recognized that these efforts focus more on matters related to teaching rather than issues on student learning.

In fact, the significance of students' voices has become explicit in the growing body of research dealing with students. Existing empirical research findings show that collaborative work between teachers and students not only created a better relationship mutually but contributed to a better understanding of learning that ultimately could enhance engagement, motivation, and eagerness within learners (Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Houghton, 2001; Rodgers, 2006).

Conclusion

In this paper, it is asserted that the main concern in English education in Thailand should be to provide learning experiences that would help learners become proficient English users in a country where English carries saliently higher social and economic values. However, as previously discussed, while the government, the public and the education system strive to improve the quality of English education, the debate has been on issues other than learning itself. This may not be unforeseen as the issues of English learning have been perceived mostly through the eyes of the government, stakeholders and even teachers, as these are the people who have the most influence on education at policy and school levels.

Learners who are in fact at the heart of the matter have often been overlooked and therefore insights into the issues concerned with learning English remain vague. However, if the issues of learning English are to be addressed, it is necessary that teachers or in this context educators try to understand the complexity of learners' experiences. In language teaching, various methods and techniques have often failed to produce effective learning although they may have appeared rational in theory (Littlewood, 1984). To discover why, we must study the learner. We have to listen to what learners can offer us in terms of how they perceive their learning and the extent to which their experiences affect them as learners of English as well as their English development and performance.

Attention has thus to be drawn to students' voices which appear critical to the successful implementation of educational reform (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). In fact, students' voices are found underutilized and underrated in the realm of EFL (Murphey, Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009). Until students' learning experiences

and voices are extensively documented and uncovered, it is posed a challenge to see Thai school students use English intelligibly and efficiently.

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