What do Thai Policy Makers Think about Education? A Critical Analysis of Published Policy Makers' Statements

Richard Watson Todd

If English language teaching is to flourish and be successful in Thailand across a wide range of contexts, government support for valuable initiatives and innovations is needed. Although there have been a large number of educational innovations in the last few years, most have had little effect on the English learning of Thai students. To understand why certain innovations are promoted and why most innovations have little impact, we need to understand the thinking of the policy makers, especially at the Ministry of Education. This paper presents a critical analysis of quotations from Ministers of Education, senior education officials and others influential in Thai education from the last few years to attempt to uncover their concerns and their conceptions of education. The analysis reveals that the policy makers subscribe to the ideology of social and economic efficiency as the philosophy driving Thai education, that they promote preconventional morality, that they view 'traditional' methods as necessarily detrimental, and that they believe there is a single best way of teaching. The implications of these views for the development of English language education in Thailand are discussed.

Keywords: Thai education, educational policy makers, educational innovation

ผู้กำหนดนโยบายของประเทศไทยคิดอย่างไรกับการศึกษา? การวิเคราะห์วิจารณ์สารของผู้กำหนดนโยบาย

การสอนภาษาอังกฤษของประเทศไทยจะพัฒนาและประสบความสำเร็จในบริบทที่หลากหลายได้นั้น การสนับสนุนจากภาครัฐในการริเริ่มสร้างสรรค์รวมทั้งนวัตกรรมที่มีประโยชน์ถือเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นอย่างยิ่ง ถึงแม้ว่าจะมีนวัตกรรมด้านการศึกษาจำนวนมากในช่วงหลายปีที่ผ่านมา นวัตกรรมส่วนใหญ่ส่งผลต่อการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษของนักเรียนไทยเพียงเล็กน้อยเท่านั้น เพื่อเข้าใจสาเหตุของการส่งเสริมนวัตกรรมต่างๆ เหล่านั้นและสาเหตุที่นวัตกรรมส่วนใหญ่ส่งผลต่อการเรียนรู้เพียงเล็กน้อย เราจำเป็นต้องเข้าใจแนวคิดของผู้กำหนดนโยบาย โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งกระทรวงศึกษาธิการ งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้นำเสนอการวิเคราะห์วิจารณ์สารของรัฐมนตรีว่าการกระทรวงการศึกษาธิการ ข้าราชการระดับสูงด้านการศึกษา และผู้มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องที่มีอำนาจตัดสินใจเกี่ยวกับการศึกษาของประเทศไทยในช่วงหลายปีที่ผ่านมา เพื่อเผยถึงความกังวลและแนวความคิดด้านการศึกษา จากการวิเคราะห์พบว่า ผู้กำหนดนโยบายใช้รากฐานแนวคิดด้านประสิทธิภาพทางสังคมและเศรษฐกิจเป็นหลักปรัชญาที่ขับเคลื่อนการศึกษาไทย ส่งเสริมการใช้จริยธรรมเป็นหลักที่ต้องยึดถือและปฏิบัติตาม พิจารณาว่าวิธี 'ดั้งเดิม' เป็นวิธีที่ก่อให้เกิดผลเสีย และมีความเชื่อว่ามีแนวทางการสอนที่ดีที่สุดเพียงวิธีเดียว ผลจากการวิจัยสามารถนำมาอภิปรายความหมายโดยนัยของทัศนะเหล่านี้เพื่อนำไปสู่การพัฒนาการศึกษาภาษาอังกฤษในประเทศไทยต่อไป

คำสำคัญ: การศึกษาของประเทศไทย ผู้กำหนดนโยบายการศึกษา นวัตกรรมด้านการศึกษา

The quality of Thai education is a continual cause for concern. Despite the promulgation of the progressive National Education Act twelve years ago (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999), criticisms of the quality of both Thai education in general (e.g. Feigenblatt, et al., 2010) and of English language teaching in particular (e.g. Baker, 2008; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2009) are common. Similarly, despite numerous efforts to initiate beneficial innovations (e.g. British Council, 2006), very little seems to change. One of the key reasons for this bleak picture is that Thai education is dominated by top-down centralised decision making (Watson Todd, 2000). If initiatives are to become reality and Thai education is to change for the better, the main top-down decision makers need to be on board, since, with the way Thai education is set up, it is these policy makers who have the power to ensure that initiatives receive the attention and support they deserve. With the key policy makers having substantial power over the future development of Thai education, it is important to understand their thinking and beliefs, and the purpose of this paper is to gain some insights into the conceptions of education, concerns and issues of interest of some of the key educational policy makers in Thailand.

Methodological approach

To investigate the thinking of key Thai educational policy makers, we need to examine what they say and write. Taking such statements at face value, however, does not necessarily provide information about their thinking, since public statements are affected by many other factors than just beliefs. We therefore need to take a critical approach to examining their statements. Such an approach has three main benefits for the purpose of this paper. First, critical approaches can uncover hidden meanings behind opaque language (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006); second, they can help in the analysis of underlying ideologies (Wallace, 2003); and third, they are particularly suited to the analysis of situations involving dominance and inequality (Flowerdew, 2008) such as the Thai education system where the Ministry has power over schools and teachers.

The data for the critical analysis is taken from newspaper articles published in the last six years which were either written by policy makers or extensively quote from them. A total of 32 articles were found which fit these criteria, and these include writings or quotations from Ministers of Education, directors of major sections at the Ministry, chairs of influential educational organisations, and presidents of major universities or other influential educational institutions.

The statements made by the policy makers in these articles were examined for commonly recurring themes. Themes were identified by searching the data for keywords that could act as shell nouns (Aktas & Cortes, 2008) with broad implications for education (e.g. *goal*, *objective*, *method*)

and then examining the specification of the shell noun in the given context. To avoid analysis of the idiosyncratic concerns of a single policy maker, identified themes need to have been discussed at some length by at least three different policy makers. By identifying themes in this way, it is likely that the themes reflect the ideologies or issues that are driving Thai education. From the data, four key themes were identified and these are discussed below in turn.

Theme 1: The curriculum ideology of economic efficiency

Perhaps the most important issue driving educational policy is the perceived purpose of education. One of the most influential statements on educational purposes is the Dearing Report on Higher Education in the UK. This report identified four main purposes of education (Miller, et al., 1998):

1. To inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential through life.
2. To increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake.
3. To serve the needs of the economy.
4. To play a major role in developing society.

These four purposes fit the four main curriculum ideologies: learner-centredness, academic rationalism, social and economic efficiency, and social reconstructionism (similar to critical pedagogy) respectively (Richards, 2002), which, in turn, reflect progressive (for the first two), reproductionist and reconstructionist value systems (Wright, 2005). Given that these ideologies and value systems are likely to have a massive impact on educational policies, which of the four do Thai policy makers subscribe to?

Perhaps the clearest ideological statement of a Thai educational policy maker was made by Wijit Srisa-arn, then-Education Minister, in 2007:

> Education is important to Thailand because quality education will produce a valuable workforce that could serve the demand in the globalised world and improve the country's competitiveness ... The objective is to develop quality people so we will have knowledgeable workers for the globalised world. The country's competitiveness will improve significantly and noticeably over the next 10 years. By then, we will be able to compete with any rivals in the region.

The driving ideology behind Thai education would therefore appear to be social and economic efficiency. However, nearly halfway through the projected ten-year period, the goal of economic efficiency is still a concern. In 2010, Veeravat Wannasiri, Chair of the Private Vocational Schools Association, stated

> the Education Ministry's panel on human resources planning put the blame [for graduates not finding jobs] squarely on the universities for turning out graduates who fail to match the needs of the labour market

and a year later, Tej Bunnag, former-Foreign Minister and Chairman of the Asian Institute of Technology, said

> Top level companies only hire the best, and if the institutes or universities are not producing graduates who match the market requirements, chances of them getting hired are remote. The private sector, on the other hand, has been complaining regarding the under-supply of globally competitive graduates and the lack of skills required by the market place.

Economic efficiency as an educational ideology would appear to be a desirable goal. After all, no teacher would be happy if their graduating students could not find employment. However, it is not without its criticisms.

Although the National Education Standards (Office of the National Education Council, 2004) support the goal of economic efficiency by arguing that education is an essential factor for "vigorous competitiveness in the international arena" (p. 1), the National Education Act (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999) appears to prioritise learner-centredness over economic efficiency. In Section 22, "The teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potentiality"; and in Section 28, "The substance of the curricula, both academic and professional, shall aim at human development". The over-riding emphasis placed on economic efficiency by Wijit Srisa-arn, therefore, appears to contradict the main purpose of education as stated in the Act.

A potentially more serious criticism of economic efficiency has been made most influentially by Bloom (1987), an advocate of academic rationalism. He argued that focusing education on what is effectively job training results in a dumbing down of education and missed opportunities for deeper learning.

A more political criticism is that reproductionist ideologies of education serve the status quo and devalue critical thinking (Wallace, 2003). As applied to Thailand, this position has been most cogently stated by Feigenblatt et al. (2010, p. 301) which is worth quoting in full:

> Greater educational opportunities were viewed as important by the Bangkok elite as a way to jump on the modernization bandwagon. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this instrumental need for education viewed people as tools for economic growth. Children

> were supposed to learn how to become efficient and obedient workers and subjects. The goal was not for most of those children to enjoy the fruits of development during their lifetime but rather for them to work for the good of the "nation" which truly meant the growth of Bangkok and the interests of the elite.

Such an argument presents the goals of economic efficiency from a different, and far more worrying, perspective. Whether one thinks that such a hidden agenda is behind the Ministry's emphasis on economic efficiency is a matter of political belief, but, whatever the reality, it does cast doubt on the use of the economic efficiency ideology as the driving force behind educational policy.

Theme 2: Promoting morals

In recent years, policy makers have repeatedly stated that Thai education should incorporate two key broad objectives. The first of these is the need to teach morals (in Thai: จริยธรรม or jariya-tham). The goal of education as producing moral people and a moral society is one of the most commonly recurring themes discussed by policy makers:

> "The ultimate goal is producing capable people with good morality, not just capable people¨ (Wijit Srisa-arn, Minister of Education, 2007)
> "[The goal is for students to] have knowledge in their brain and also have good social skills and moral virtues in their heart" (Virachai Techavijit, Chairman, Regent's School, 2010)
> "Parents and school staff are placing too much emphasis on exams and competition between students, despite the fact that fostering virtue, social skills and a positive attitude towards learning is the most important thing for children." (Abhisit Vejjajiva, Prime Minister, 2010)
> "Education is everything that leads to a happy and healthy populace, a better society, and a society that is more just - a society that we would like to call a society governed by dharma. It is a society that is moral and ethical in every way." (Arthit Ourairat, former-House Speaker and President of Rangsit University, 2009)

While it may seem that instilling morals in students is a valid goal for education, none of the policy makers state what they mean by 'morals'. Research into children's moral development has suggested that they typically go through three stages: preconventional morality (based on obedience and reciprocity), conventional morality (based on interpersonal harmony), and postconventional morality (based on the social contract and universal principles) (Tan et al., 2003). Implicitly in the statements of policy makers and explicitly in the national test of morals organised by the National Institute of Educational Testing Services (NIETS), it appears that the policy makers believe that there is a 'correct' set of morals and that morality is largely preconventional in that students are expected to obey the morals decided upon by their seniors. Such a view allows a hidden purpose behind the promotion of morals. As Feigenblatt et al. (2010) state, the Thai educational curriculum

includes “a disproportionate number of hours in morals and religion. Students were and are still taught mostly about how to behave and what to believe in primary school ... The ideal is to shape children into submissive workers who are satisfied with what they have and who do not question authority” (p. 302). In this way, the promotion of morals may have the same underlying ulterior motives as the ideology of economic efficiency.

Theme 3: Promoting critical and analytical thinking

The second key broad objective is the promotion of critical and analytical thinking skills. This objective is mentioned in the National Education Act which says that education should “enable learners to think critically” (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999, Section 24) and has been stressed by Ministers of Education, such as Jurin Laksanavisit in 2009:

> The first pillar is a new generation of Thai people who will be able to think critically and analytically ... I assigned all MOE agencies to design methods whereby students can develop increased critical thinking skills and analytical acumen ... OBEC will be instructed to adopt methods which focus on critical thinking.

Also in 2009, retiring Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Education, Khunying Kasama Voravan Na Ayudhaya, while similarly stressing the importance of analytical thinking as a key educational objective, had a slightly different take on how this objective could be achieved:

> In other countries, they define analytical thinking of students as far broader than forcing them to practise analytical skills in class and only as specified by the school curriculum ... Developing an analytical culture in Thai society should be the place to start.

The most noticeable effect of the push to promote critical and analytical thinking has been the adoption of tests of analytical thinking as part of the university entrance system in the form of the General Aptitude Test and the Professional Aptitude Test (similar to the Scholastic Aptitude Test of the US). This move, however, may have had the opposite effect to its goal. Uthumporn Jamornmarn, Head of the NIETS, in 2010 talked about recent increases in GAT and PAT scores:

> Special tuition classes outside of school may have helped enhance their skills. But how the skills were improved was of secondary importance to the fact that more students actually made substantial gains ... When children are familiar with analytical tests, they will be able to understand the subjects better.

The improvements in test scores suggest that Khunying Kasama´s warnings about taking a surface approach to analytical skills have not been addressed. If a short period of studying at a cram school can lead to an improvement in analytical thinking scores, the tests do not appear to be aiming at “developing an analytical culture,” but rather at practising a limited set of predetermined

analytical skills. The most serious issues concerning the promotion of critical and analytical thinking in Thai education, then, appear to concern how this goal is to be reached.

Theme 4: The need to reform teaching methods

Complaints about the quality of Thai education have been a constantly recurring theme over several decades, and are also noticeable in statements made by Education Ministers in the six years covered by this study. In 2005, Chaturon Chaisaeng argued that:

> English language teaching methods should be changed from learning by rote and grammar to communication with a focus on speaking, writing and comprehension ... The new curriculum must not upset students or teachers, but introduce easy-to-understand teaching methods ... Whatever is too difficult for children must be corrected while whatever is used for teaching must be evaluated and updated.

In 2006 he repeated the argument: "Teachers should not "force-feed" students but devise spontaneous methods of conducting classes to make lessons interesting."

Wijit Srisa-arn had the same concerns in 2007: "Teachers numbering around 700,000 nationwide still apply the same obsolete teaching methods."

Suggesting that no progress had been made, in 2009 Jurin Laksanavisit assigned Ministry officials to investigate "how educators can eliminate teacher-centred classes and rote learning," arguing:

> The second pillar comprises highly trained teachers who are able to teach our children using modern teaching pedagogies ... Almost all of Thailand's 500,000 existing and long-serving teachers, administrators and managers will need to be retrained to use modern teaching methods ... all 500,000 teachers will be trained to a single standard, using a single high-quality curriculum ... To ensure that the strict standards are maintained, each teacher shall be evaluated before and after the training course ... Periodic follow-ups will ensure that teachers continue to employ the special skills learned ... Future university graduates will be steeped in modern tutelage.

While an easy target, rote learning in itself is not necessarily detrimental, since it may be an effective learning method for some objectives, especially for learning collocations and formulaic phrases and for improving pronunciation (Cook, 1994; Ding, 2007). The problem is not that rote learning exists; rather, it is the excessive emphasis placed on it. Demands to eliminate rote learning appear to set up rote learning as a strawman which can easily be criticised. The suggestions for what should replace rote learning, however, are less clear. Apparently, teaching methods are valuable as long as they are 'modern', and there may even be a single ideal 'modern' method.

The arguments about teaching methods made by Education Ministers are as obsolete as the methods they criticise. For over twenty years, it has been widely accepted that the search for an ideal teaching method is misguided (e.g. Kumaravadivelu, 1994). The influence of context and participants on the potential effectiveness of teaching methods far outweighs any benefits inherent to a particular method, and such influences also mean that 'modern' methods are not necessarily preferable. Even if there was an ideal method, experience of previous attempts to implement methodological innovation in Thailand has shown that policy demands have very little influence on classroom practice (e.g. Darasawang & Watson Todd, forthcoming; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2009). Given that there is no one-method-fits-all, it is probably beneficial that English language learning in Thailand is not overly restricted by methodological policy demands, since competent teachers are relatively free to make methodological decisions appropriate to their immediate context.

Implications for English language teaching initiatives in Thailand

There are three ways of viewing the beliefs of the policy makers. First, if we as teachers follow the seemingly preferred educational model of becoming obedient, submissive workers, we can simply accept and follow the conceptions and demands of the policy makers. This would mean that curricula should be set up with objectives meeting the needs of employers, that we should attempt to instill obedience and preconventional morality in our students, that we should teach surface-level critical and analytical skills, and that we should ditch many of our proven teaching methods and strive to be as modern as possible. It would also mean that we would need to ignore the inherent contradictions in the beliefs of the policy makers - that any real critical thinking stands in opposition to preconventional morality, and that reproductionist value systems promote rote learning. Fortunately, it seems unlikely that many teachers will follow this route.

Second, if we have taken on board the critical thinking apparently promoted by the policy makers, we can resist their initiatives, either actively by arguing against them or passively by ignoring them. Given the lack of evidence of any real progress being derived from policy initiatives, the last choice of ignoring policy makers' initiatives may be the most common reaction, allowing teachers to make the changes they feel are most appropriate for their situation.

Third, if we would like to promote and gain acceptance for our own initiatives, we can couch them in terms reflecting the beliefs of the policy makers. When setting up a new curriculum, include morals and critical and analytical thinking skills among its stated objectives and show how

its graduates can enhance the country's competitiveness (even if such issues are barely dealt with in the curriculum). When promoting a methodological innovation, imply how modern it is. While such an approach only pays lip-service to policies and smacks of manipulation, in the Thai educational context where the power differences in the hierarchy are large, this approach may tip the balance between an initiative being implemented and it being ignored.

The key issue here is who decides what happens in ELT classrooms in Thailand: the policy makers or the teachers? While there are enough horror stories of appalling teaching in Thai classrooms to justify a need for a measure of central control, the problem is that such control may penalise good teachers by reducing their freedom to make decisions more than it curbs bad teaching. For example, a teacher may, for the best of reasons, decide to reduce students' propensity for making grammatical errors by teaching formulaic phrases on the basis that this leads to improved performance (Yu, 2009). The teaching of formulaic phrases, however, may lead to increases in the use of rote learning, and thus the teacher who has implemented a potentially beneficial innovation with the goal of promoting learning becomes open to criticism for not following the preferred methodology of policy makers. For the future development of Thai education, a delicate balance between central control to implement policy makers' initiatives and individual freedom for teachers to make their own decisions is needed. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to suggest how such a balance can be achieved, awareness of what policy makers really believe is crucial.

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Biodata

Richard Watson Todd has worked at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi for nearly 20 years where he is Associate Professor and Head of the Centre for Research and Services in the School of Liberal Arts. He is the author of *Much Ado about English* and *Classroom Teaching Strategies*, and has published numerous articles in the areas of text linguistics, computer-based analyses of language, and curriculum innovatio