

## Navigating Pathways to Success in ELT

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### Abstract

*This paper commences with ELT in Thailand and the central role for the English language. A brief account on the development of English curriculum is presented as one of several attempts from all parties involved to improve ELT. However, Thai learners' English proficiency, as measured by different benchmarks, was congruently unsatisfactory. Possible factors hindering positive outcomes for ELT are described. Given the focus of this paper on enhancing the English proficiency of Thai teachers, **barriers** that teachers encounter and **bridges** that are meant to better prepare individual language teachers are discussed. First, the paper emphasizes that teacher training should focus on not only **teaching methods** but also **linguistic knowledge**. Diverse areas of linguistics are exemplified to illustrate what a teacher should know to be "proficient" in English. Second, for several practical reasons, local training should be the plausible goal of the teaching staff. In addition, teachers should also perform the role of researchers. In so doing, the classroom situation can be described as both **learner-autonomous** because learners' performances determine what needs to be taught and **teacher-autonomous** because, with their linguistic knowledge, teachers can be on their own. Finally, in a hopeful light, the aspirations for every teacher's success can be forged, and we, side by side, will remain on pathways leading to academic success in ELT in Thailand.*

### 1. ELT in Thailand and central role of English

For better or worse, we do live in a global village. Along with economic globalization, English has increasingly become the medium of communication around the world both in local and global contexts. Consequently, the demand for English language skills and English language education, as English language professionals are most acutely aware, has exploded. Thailand's acknowledgement of and capitulation to this phenomenon is captured by this statement: "...a good knowledge of English is no longer a luxury but a necessity in Thai society." (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2003:453). To meet the demands of global economics and to cope with the growing local and

national demands for English skills, new initiatives have been launched in all aspects of the Thai educational system, including curriculum, materials, facilities, and professional development for teachers.

## **2. English curriculum in Thailand and its development**

To illustrate constant and serious attempts to improve ELT in Thailand, please consider the changes in the Thai English curriculum. In a nutshell, many substantial changes have been made to the curriculum (Angwattanagul, 1992). Perhaps the most dramatic change, for instance, took place in 1996 when English was made compulsory for all primary school children in Grade 1. Emphasis was placed on the development of the students' language proficiency for a number of purposes: communication, acquisition of knowledge, use of English in tertiary level studies, and career development. A few years later, the 1999 National Act emphasized a learner-centered classroom culture and life-long learning. The currently used English curriculum was introduced in 2001. At the university level, English language curriculum has been reformed to better respond to the demand for English language skills in the workplace. As a result, paradigm shift was evident with an emphasis on autonomous learning, independent work, and innovations and new technology in ELT.

## **3. Thai learners' English proficiency**

This paper would be incomplete without mentioning the outcome of ELT after years of development, energy, and efforts from all parties involved to promote ELT in Thailand. Certainly, numerous assessment aspects are potential indicators of the successes or shortcomings of ELT in Thailand. But in this section, the emphasis is placed on the proficiency of the Thai learners' English skills. A survey conducted by the Office of Educational Testing of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction,

Ministry of Education (1999a; 1999b) found that learners, being assessed against standardized benchmarks of achievement, had unsatisfactory proficiency in language skills and thus failed to achieve the standards required (Wiriyachitra, 2001). Further national surveys were conducted by the Office of Educational Testing (1999) comparing learners' abilities in Thai, English, social studies, mathematics, science foundations for work and career, health, and general characteristics; the findings indicated that the respondents' writing skills were significantly low, but when the results were combined with what was termed "general English ability," the results were satisfactory. At an international level, Prapphal and Opanon-Amata (2002) investigated Thai graduate students' English performances measured by CU-TEP scores. Thais' CU-TEP scores were equated with ASEAN students' TOEFL scores; these findings indicated that Thai student English proficiency was lower than that of all students from other ASEAN countries, with the exception of Laotian graduates.

The other two studies which have stirred the national interest in ELT are Bunnag's studies (2005a, 2005b), which appeared in one of the two leading English newspaper in Thailand for two consecutive days. Based on the scores of two international standardized tests: TOEFL and TOEIC, the TOEFL scores of Thai test takers, among the 9 ASEAN countries, ranked eighth (mean = 201), whereas the TOEIC scores of Thai test takers came fourth in 6 ASEAN countries (524 from the full score of 990). In short, these studies, be at national or international levels, congruently indicated that most Thai learners did not achieve the goals set forth by the national policy on English education.

#### **4. Possible factors hindering positive outcomes for ELT**

Several factors are responsible for the success and failure of ELT (CU academic Service Center, 2000). For instance, as far as *curriculum*

is concerned, there have been frequent changes of the curricula throughout the history of ELT in Thailand. The characteristics of the *learners* also play a pivotal role in ELT. Thai learners' attitudes and unique learning styles need to be seriously considered, especially when a teaching method is adopted. Thanks to the availability of ***IT technology***, lesson planning and connecting the lessons to real world situations is much facilitated. Most often, successful language programs cannot be run without sufficient ***budget*** allocation from a higher unit of administration. Budget allocated to support programs must be made available; however, the issue is slightly beyond our control and will not be discussed here. As for ***teaching methodology***, CLT or communicative language teaching often fails to create sufficient opportunities for genuine interaction in the language classroom. ***Learning media, course materials, facilities, and resources*** are another factor. Producing course materials is a long engaging process, whereas ready made materials like commercial textbooks have been made available. Decisions need to be made on which commercial textbooks are to be adopted and which aspects of the textbooks are to be adapted, explored, and expanded in response to the teachers' needs and the learners' interests. However, the exploitation of a textbook would not be possible if the ***teacher*** were not ***knowledgeable*** and ***well-rounded***. To successfully make full use of the textbooks, teachers should be able to connect the topics in the materials to what students have already known in terms of their language skills, personal lives, and real world situations. Teachers' inadequate preparations and command of English are partly responsible for the failure of ELT. This paper also emphasizes that teachers play a crucial role in ELT for two major reasons. Primarily, teachers are the persons who work most closely with learners. Additionally, as masters in their own classrooms, teachers can test small ideas or innovations. Teachers should be considered the principal driving

engines of ELT, contributing to the success and maximizing positive outcomes in ELT.

## **5. Individual teachers - main driving forces of ELT**

To revisit the issue of teacher qualifications in Thailand, a number of Thai teachers of English are under-qualified. Given the prominent role of teachers, the remainder of this paper is devoted to the topic of, and related issues to, English teachers. Teachers need multi-level support, including those at the community level, at the institutional level, and at the individual teacher level. At the community level, coordinated systems of responses to help address the problems and challenges encountered by teachers should be established. Thai TESOL represents such an effort at this level. At the institutional level, support and resources in schools should be provided. In this sense, forging a partnership at the institutional and community levels is crucial to the win/win teamwork scenarios for ELT. The rest of this paper focuses on what individual teachers need and how such needs can be fulfilled.

## **6. Barriers at the individual teacher level**

The issue of English teachers in Thailand entails two dimensions: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, there are never enough trained teachers in ELT. A dire shortage of teachers of English has been an ongoing obstacle at various levels of ELT. Exacerbating the situation is the more detrimental problem of the quality of English teachers. Studies show that Thai teachers of English generally have low levels of proficiency and they lack the necessary training to address learners' needs.

The attempts to improve the quality of teachers of English have been stymied by misleading assumptions about teacher education in Thailand, for example:

- 1) Teachers need to be trained **only in teaching methods**, which were originally developed and proved to be successful in Western classroom situations and thus were assumed to be applicable to Thai learners.
- 2) Teaching staff should be upgraded by special courses **overseas**.

### **6.1. Do teachers need to be trained only in teaching methods?**

As resource persons for learners in a classroom, teachers need to be able to apply an appropriate teaching method or combinations of methods which benefit their target learners most. However, the smartest choice of teaching method cannot be beneficial without teachers' linguistic knowledge. A question emerges, "Are English teachers in Thailand well equipped to be resource persons and become independent or autonomous in a classroom?"

What do we mean by linguistic knowledge and why is it important? Basic linguistic knowledge is essential to equip English teachers with a scholastic knowledge of linguistics for the benefits of developing learners' language skills. Here, I am going to demonstrate how linguistic knowledge can contribute to the success of teaching language skills. Due to space constraint, two productive skills (speaking and writing) deserve our attention for two reasons. First, Thai teachers tend to lack confidence in their own spoken and written English, leaving the two language skills largely under-practiced in the classroom. Second, following the current trend of teaching methodology and the nature of commercial textbooks, productive skills are prioritized.

***What should an English teacher know to be “proficient” in teaching speaking skills?***

**Phonetics**

To effectively teach speaking skills of a language, basic knowledge of spoken elements of the target language is crucial. Elements of spoken English include a wide range from individual sounds of consonants and vowels to stress and intonation, subcomponents of **phonetics**. Perhaps a concrete and anecdotal example will convince you how crucial it is to pronounce English sounds accurately. Definitely, the experience was quite painful because it took me more than two decades to realize that I mispronounced the letter *h* in English.

While studying for my doctoral degree in the US, I regularly received phone calls from a sales representative of my credit card company. As a part of telephone conversation protocol, a sales representative needs to verify the identification of the credit card holder. Unfortunately and fortunately in a sense, my long last name contained the letter *h*. I was conscious to spell my last name slowly and accurately so that the sales representative could get it all in one “take.” That never happened though. As was always the case, the sales representative would ask me for further clarification of my letter *h*. Obviously, the sales representative mistook my letter *h* for the letter *s*. Repeated clarification questions from different sales representatives made me wonder what went wrong with this letter pronunciation. I asked my son and daughter who grew up in the States to read the letter to me. BINGO! After all these years! It is thus obligatory that teachers know the sound system of English. By ‘knowing,’ I mean teachers need to know how consonant and vowel sounds in English are pronounced. It might not be an easy task, but it is not impossible either. Certain English sounds are found to be

problematic for Thai learners due to their absence in the Thai language.

These include the initial sounds in the words *think*, *thank* and *them*, *the*.

How about vowel sounds? Given the larger number of vowel sounds in Thai than that in English, one might assume that Thai teachers would have no problem with English vowel sounds. Consider the following examples of words which are well familiar to anybody in ELT: *guess*, *said*, *bread*, *friend* / *full-fool* / and *back-bag*. Phonetically, the vowel sound in the words of *guess*, *said*, *bread*, and *friend* are likely to be mispronounced by Thais. Meanwhile, the vowel sounds in each pair of words, *full-fool* and *back-bag*, are not identical.

Another level higher than consonant and vowel sounds includes stress and intonation. Consider the following words: *ceremony*, *atom*, *sofa*, *comfortable*, *tradition*, *occur*, *even*, and *event*. These words have their own specific patterns of stress which unfortunately cannot be predicted. In addition, intonation patterns in English are known to convey the speaker's feelings and attitudes. Consider the utterance of "Yes" and "Would you like to have some water or coffee?" and see if you can manipulate your intonation patterns to convey different feelings and attitudes to your interlocutor.

In some situations or lessons, teachers might be expected to have awareness of the discrepancies between major varieties of English such as American English (AE) and British English (BE) that are prevalent at different linguistic levels. At phonetic level, the same lexical item can be pronounced differently by two speakers. For instance, New Yorkers are likely to pronounce the medial sounds of the words *letter*, *butter*, *better*, *putting* with a flap sound. Unlike New Yorkers, Londoners tend to pronounce the medial sound of these words with a strong aspirated *t* sound. It impressed me when one of my American colleagues asked me the question, "Why do I pronounce the following words with the flap

sound: *letter, butter, better, putting*? This is a valid and intriguing question because it demonstrates that being a native speaker of English is not a requirement for an English class. In fact, Thai teachers can do the job and well too because Thai teachers can make use of their learning and teaching experience, be it positive or negative, linking to the learners' needs and understanding what they are going through when learning English.

At this juncture, note that the best resource for pronunciation is often at your fingertips: a dictionary. With foundation knowledge in phonetics, teachers can make full use of the dictionary and be a model for learners. All in all, the examples illustrated throughout this section are to illustrate that a knowledgeable teacher of English can have such a long-lasting and positive impact in ELT.

- **Lexical items or vocabulary**

Mastering pronunciation is only part of the distance down the pathway to success in speaking. For more advanced learners, developing a sensitivity to the lexical preferences of each English variety can be a valuable asset. ELT in Thailand is a mix of ingredients of principal English varieties such as AE and BE. Lexically, it is not easy to figure out if a certain word is preferred by an American or a Brit. Some examples to illustrate my point include the following pairs of words: *eraser-rubber*, *pants-trousers*, and *biscuit-cracker*. The last word pair was brought to my attention by an email that I received from the Thailand Research Fund or TRF in June this year. It is an email message meant for scholars in biological network. Usually, I read it in passing, having nothing to contribute because it always dealt with topics related to biological issues. However, this email described how difficult for the TRF staff to compile a

database of scholars working on the same or related topics of interest. The complication arose when some scholars used the word *biscuits*, while others used the word *crackers* in their CVs. Having read their message, I emailed them for the first time clarifying the complication they encountered. This shows that linguists and/or language teachers can contribute to the progress of biology in their own merits. Such lexical discrepancies can be found not only across English varieties as mentioned earlier but also within a single English variety. For example, to refer to a “same” item, some Americans use the word *pail*; whereas, others use the word *bucket*. Likewise, the choice of words like *soda*, *pop*, and *coke* can vary regionally.

- **Pragmatics**

At the advanced level, pragmatic knowledge seems crucial in determining the success of cross-cultural communication. Often times, communication breaks down as a result of mispronunciation, inappropriate lexical items, and lack of pragmatic knowledge. The notion of communicative competence advocated by Dell Hymes in the 80’s seems often based on the assumed abilities of native speakers of English - cross cultural pragmatics. Consider the following examples:

- It's hot in here!
- The box is heavy.
- It's getting late!
- I'm hungry.

These utterances are simple in their syntactic structure, straightforward and transparent in the use of lexical items. However, if a learner assuming the role of a secretary responds to the first utterance

produced by a boss by saying, “*I agree with you.*” Pragmatically, miscommunication takes place.

Language changes over time and so do pragmatic functions. For example, a recent research study reveals that tag questions can have multiple pragmatic functions: 1) primarily to seek information and confirmation, 2) to express speaker’s attitude, and 3) soften and emphasize requests (Hoffman & Gottlie, 2007). Due to the significance of pragmatic systems in a language, this element needs to be integrated in the instruction of English when appropriate. Its importance is also endorsed by TOEFL iBT, introduced in 2005, which emphasizes the assessment of pragmatic ability in English of the test takers.

## **Writing skill**

- **Morphology**

For teachers to successfully perform the role of resource persons in a language classroom, the knowledge of morphology or how words are formed is essential. When a new word or lexical item is introduced to the class, teachers should expand learners’ vocabulary repertoire by teaching them also a number of related words generated by morphological processes. For instance, a set of related words (*discuss-discussion-discussant, economy-economics-economic-economical, explain-explanation-explanatory*) need to be introduced to the class together with their use in contexts (*discuss + object, discussion + about*). At this juncture, the teachers might find the notions of collocations (e.g., *economic crisis, situation, policy*) and formulaic expressions (e.g., *to have a discussion about something = to discuss something*) useful. Teachers’ ability to convey the same message differently by manipulating various morphological processes can be impressive.

- **Sociolinguistics**

Language use varies depending on social factors including register, age, status, socio-economic background, gender, relationship, topic, media, venue, etc. Therefore, teachers need to know whether the choice of language produced is appropriate or not. For example, when teaching how to write a business letter, teachers need to know one sentence is more preferable than the other (e.g., *I would like to inform you that...* vs *I want to let you know that...*). Other examples include

- Hi! What's up? vs Good morning! What happened?

I hope I can convince teachers that linguistic knowledge is essential to accomplish the goal of being “proficient” teachers. In short, teachers need to be **knowledgeable** and **well-rounded**. Inadequately trained teachers can be de-motivating for learners. Therefore, first of all, individual teachers should know what aspect(s) of linguistic knowledge they need help with. Once their own specific professional needs are identified, then, what? Get help!

### **Teacher training**

For ELT to succeed in Thailand, or in any country for that matter, there must be a pool of teachers and teacher trainers with the competence to teach the language. Training is a chance to help less experienced colleagues develop their professional skills. As a result, limited resources have to be distributed between recruiting and training more teachers of English. Meanwhile, the provision of in-service training for those already teaching English in schools must be maintained. This leads to the question of “Where?”

## **6.2. Should the teaching staff be upgraded by special courses overseas?**

Most teachers dream or aspire to have an opportunity to receive at least some training overseas. Training abroad is important, however *limited* in any ways. First, opportunities for training abroad are all too infrequent. Besides, short training courses organized by aid agencies overseas are not terribly effective due to limited time, while teaching training should be an on-going process, not simply a “once-in-a- lifetime” or one-month training program. Therefore, local support is preferable.

### **Local assistance**

Teacher training and teacher development should be organized locally by local trainers, which might be a serious challenge to the success of ELT in Thailand. However, for training to be of utmost benefit, teachers are encouraged to reflect on their current teaching practices, social contexts within which they are working, specific linguistic areas they need to develop, and their potential to realistically change and develop. In fact, the best persons to assess teachers’ needs are the local teachers themselves.

More local efforts can be made to meet the demand for both teaching methods and linguistic knowledge. Local staff with adequate training in TESOL/EFL methodology and language skills can act as agents for change. Local trainers could be the best people to develop modes and the content of training that are relevant and most beneficial to their colleagues. Currently, universities and colleges throughout Thailand have established various ELT programs on or off campus. The setting up of these programs has helped a great deal to increase the limited financial resources of local institutions. Another benefit for local training is that after training, English teachers can continue with their teaching

independently, while the trainer can occasionally monitor teacher progress and improvement.

## 7. Teachers as researchers

Teachers could not perform their functions effectively without being researchers. Do not freak out! One activity for local trainers is to introduce their less experienced colleagues to *action research techniques*. To satisfy the learners' demands, teachers need to identify the language learners' needs. Once these needs are identified and clarified, each teacher can become confident and creative enough to find his or her own possible solutions.

When learners submitted their paragraphs to their teachers, teachers should embark on a research task by identifying problems in their language use. A sizable and representative data source or so called *corpus* is a relatively novel idea emerged in the western world about 10 years or so ago. I would rather call this type of corpus a *serendipitous corpus* because the corpus was not pre-planned but came into existence from the learners' language production. The one to be described here is my corpus of 72 argumentative essays written by first year students at my university. This corpus is serendipitous because I, as a teacher, had no idea of their level of English proficiency. Therefore, I asked them to write an essay on a topic. When I read their essays, I was struck by the fact that errors on subject-verb agreement were prominent. Congruently, a dissertation revealed that S-V agreement, among other grammatical errors, was most frequent in Thai university students' writing (Pongsiriwet, 2001). Therefore, I decided to analyze my serendipitous corpus. The S-V agreement errors have various manifestations, and thus the general S-V agreement category was far too broad. Based on *Harbrace College Skills Handbooks*, 13<sup>th</sup> edition (1998), this type of errors was classified into a

number of categories which provide the analytical framework to analyze my serendipitous corpus. However, taking a glance at my corpus, I realized that such a framework might not be applicable to Thai essays; therefore, adaptation of the framework was made to accommodate the typical characteristics of English essays produced by Thai learners. The nine revised categories are as follows:

- 1) Subject-verb agreement in standard sentence structure
- 2) Subject-verb agreement with intervening materials of prepositional phrases
- 3) Compound subjects joined by *and*
- 4) Compound subjects joined by *or, either...or, neither...nor, not...but, or not only...but also*
- 5) Inverted word order or *there / here + verb* constructions
- 6) Relative pronouns used as subjects
- 7) Indefinite pronouns requiring singular or plural verbs with or without intervening materials
- 8) Titles of single works and nouns plural in form but singular in meaning
- 9) Collective nouns and phrases

Which category of errors do you think was the most frequent in my serendipitous corpus? Be my guests!

**Results:** Types 1, 2, 6, and 7 (61, 14, 13, and 10%, respectively).

Most S-V agreement errors were found in standard structure sentences.

Let's take a look at the examples of Type 1.

- (1) \**This reason make them lack of order.*
- (2) \**Student don't care who rich or poor.*
- (3) \**Uniform are expensive.*
- (4) \**Children does not have money.*
- (5) \**It have good looking for every person.*
- (6) \**They was handed down from the past.*
- (7) \**He do not wear clean uniform.*
- (8) \**You gets the money and property.*

The results were surprising, and, definitely, against our intuition and anticipation. Q: Are they caused by L1 transfer? A: Possibly! However, it seems to be such a hasty conclusion without considering a bigger picture. In England where I presented my corpus research and exchanged opinions with other fellow researchers, I learned that the same errors were predominantly produced by learners of English from other countries like Sweden, France, Germany, or Italy. This finding, as substantiated by learners of English from different L1s, is really enlightening contributing to the field of language acquisition.

What else can be drawn or generated from the finding of the study? What are some of the implications of the findings? It is possible that learners might exert their avoidance strategy, not producing complex sentences but opting to adhere to the use of simple sentences because they felt more '*secure.*' The errors found could be caused by the fear of making mistakes or simply their incapability of using S-V agreement correctly. One thing that is insightful to teachers is that what was taught by teachers was not accurately produced by learners. Could it be that Thai learners know the S-V agreement rules, but the rules were not internalized by them? However, what seems to be clear is that these learners lack self-

editing skills. More importantly, it is likely that teachers' assumed that students have had enough instructions on S-V agreement in simple sentences and thus devoted their teaching time on S-V agreement in more complex syntactic structures. Then, a philosophical question arises. Should the teacher teach what the students need or teach what teachers think they need?

This section of the paper shows that a corpus compiled serendipitously allows teachers to know not only what linguistic features should be taught but also in what order. As witnessed by the developments of ELT in Thailand, there has been a concerted effort to move away from *teacher-centeredness* to *learner-centeredness* in ELT in Thailand. The corpus analysis shows clearly that what we learn from the learner corpus should determine what to be taught or emphasized in a classroom. In this sense, learner autonomy is achieved because the learner's needs determine the content of the class. That is, the lesson is determined primarily by the students' implicit needs that emerge from the corpus analysis.

## **8. Bridges - practical suggested pathways to success for English teachers**

1. Do not be afraid to ask for help. But first, teachers need to be able to identify their needs. Then, ask for help from both inside and outside of schools.
2. Get involved when extracurricular activities are available. For instance, meeting new people and participating in mentorship programs; mentor or "buddies," partnership between schools and community organizations.

3. Believe in yourself. Teaching is full of challenges and surprises. Therefore, always believe that you have or can acquire skills, abilities, and potentials in succeeding at teaching English.
4. Be open-minded towards challenges, innovations, or the “unfamiliar.”

## **9. Conclusion**

I would like to close by calling for the efforts from individual teachers in the process of development. I need to emphasize again and again that no change can be made unless teachers themselves want to change. As long as teachers want to make changes, they will find a way to do it. Given the longstanding and preeminent positions played by many institutions within ELT in Thailand, I am confident that these institutions are ready to take up the challenges described earlier. I believe that the expertise contained within these institutions in Thailand could be invaluable in providing responses to the desperate imperative for teaching training and development and to consolidate the already existing expertise. In so doing, teacher autonomy, life-long learning, task- and problem-based teaching, and learner-centered instruction will be accomplished. With coordination among all parties involved, our aspirations for teachers' success can be forged, and we, side by side, will remain on pathways leading to academic success in ELT in Thailand.

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