Curriculum Context Analysis to Support Meaningful EFL Reading in Thailand

Pragasit Sitthitikul

Abstract

This paper analyzes the curriculum of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Thailand, with the focus on the reading skills. The reasons why the curriculum in use needs to be changed in order to support meaningful learning are discussed. Overall, the goals of this paper are to (a) present the current EFL classroom curriculum practice in Thailand, and implications of poorly designed instruction that affect the learning outcomes of the students, (b) describe the instructional context for the need to attend to curriculum change (design) at a national level, (c) define and specify the dimensions of curriculum change, and (d) discuss the possible and practical ways to bring about the change.

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Current Classroom Curriculum Practice

This section will describe the current EFL curriculum practice in Thailand in general, and what seems to account for its existence and persistence. In Thailand, where English is taught as the compulsory foreign language, the instruction in reading has not proven to be effective and innovative enough to make the English classroom a successful and stimulating one. This claim is not exaggerated and can be supported with the research results revealing that more than half of the undergraduate students could not interact satisfactorily and effectively when they had to communicate in English (Wongsuwan, 1992). In addition, their reading skill was the weakest skill they performed. The research noted that teachers invariably failed to provide adequate practice for students to become strategic readers (Wirunhayan, 1987). In other words, teachers often emphasized word meanings and content acquisition over building reading abilities. They failed to provide meaningful learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving activities for the students, and most of the teachers did not teach students the study skills that could lead them to be independent readers (Thanbanjerdsuk, 1983). The common instruction that teachers practiced was mainly based on the translation method by which teachers provided the meanings of every unfamiliar word to students and then translated the text into

their own language. The instruction and practice in reading classes mainly involve translating the English texts into Thai by the instructors. As a consequence of the experiences, students develop a bottom-up view of reading, interacting passively with texts with the ingrained purpose of knowing every unknown word and mastering the details the writer has set forth. Furthermore, in a recent academic review, the Ministry of Education in Thailand profiled university entrance test scores indicating that only one-third of high school students read proficiently. In other words, most of them failed to read strategically as a result of the traditional curriculum and instruction.

The reports reflect the poor standard, or possibly the failure, of the instruction methods used in most schools in Thailand, where teachers play the central role in the classroom discussion. As I have learned from the presentations from various conferences I have participated in, and my own teaching experience, besides the research findings, most Thai teachers basically use the traditional method to teach their students. For instance, the translation method is widely employed in reading classes. Thus, the students are limited in their opportunities to learn how to read strategically and to go beyond a basic understanding of the text being read. As a result, Thai students tend to find it difficult to summarize what they are learning, in part because they have not had practice in reformulating what they learn into their own language. In addition, it is clear that the reading programs in Thailand depend too much on rote learning. There is no doubt that memorizing without understanding can lead at best to very limited learning

outcomes (Watkins, 2000).

Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is influenced by several factors including inadequate prior knowledge, poor study skills and cultural or language differences. A common problem that EFL students face is learning and remembering the vast amount of information they are required to read. The reading skills needed for success in studying English are substantially different from those taught in their own language. This type of reading, or studying, involves a number of complex activities such as understanding and remembering task demands, identifying and selectively attending to important information, using appropriate study strategies for remembering that information, monitoring comprehension and learning, and taking corrective action when necessary (Baker & Brown, 1984; Brown, 1980). Many Thai students are faced with great challenges, and they struggle when they have to read English texts , make sense of them for class, and write academic papers based on them. Students who are successful learners have been able to realize by themselves what the most effective reading strategies for a given learning situation are. Students who struggle typically lack this self-knowledge and self-awareness (Vaidya, 1999).

Thus, I would like to see the change in the English curriculum that promotes metacognitive strategies for students learning English in order to promote meaningful learning as well as critical thinking. This is because metacognitive strategies foster independent learning. The definition of metacognition and why it needs to be promoted

will be discussed in the subsequent section.

The Change in Classroom Curriculum Practice

Educators long have been interested in learners' knowledge and control of their own cognitive activities (Flavell, 1979; Nickerson, 1988; Sternberg, 1984). Within the literacy community, there has been an interest in developing clearer conceptions of metacognition and its role in construction of meaning (Baker & Brown, 1984; Garner & Reis, 1981; Jones & Pellegrini, 1996; Schmitt, 1988). Although the current focus on such planning and monitoring activities falls within the framework for research in metacognition, reading researchers and educators will recognize that the issues are not new. Researchers since the turn of the century have been aware that reading involves the planning, checking, and evaluating activities now regarded as metacognitive skills. Moreover, numerous studies have attempted to determine differences between good and poor readers in relation to the strategies that are crucial to effective reading (Golinkoff, 1975; Ryan, 1981).

As a whole, research suggests that good readers have more effective strategies for selecting and attending to important information in a text. Poor readers, on the contrary, seldom monitor their comprehension and often display a lack of awareness and reading management skills. Since effective readers must have some awareness and control of the cognitive activities they engage in as they read, most characterizations of reading include skills and activities that involve metacognition. Some of the

metacognitive skills involved in reading are: (a) clarifying the purposes of reading, that is, understanding both the explicit and implicit task demands; (b) identifying the important aspects of a message; (c) focusing attention on the major content rather than trivia; (d) monitoring ongoing activities to determine whether comprehension is occurring; (e) engaging in self-questioning to determine whether goals are being achieved; and (f) taking corrective action when failures in comprehension are detected (Brown, 1980).

As an EFL student in the past, I am aware that the ability to read English well and strategically is the key element to achieve the learning goal in higher education where numerous materials are in English. The learning goal in this sense is that students should be able to read academic texts in English, get the main ideas, and summarize them in their own words. Many Thai students struggle when they read course materials in class, and it takes time for a lot of them to overcome the difficulties. Thus, the new English curriculum should promote metacognitive reading strategies for Thai students to create meaningful and independent learning for academic or informative purposes. I also would like to see the changes in the extent to which the teaching of English in the Thai classroom context incorporates metacognitive approaches and ultimately in how teachers can be supported in making their students more aware of the learning strategies they do use and could use in reading. If this policy is not nationally implemented, there will not be much improvement in learning English among Thai students with the same traditional method as previously discussed.

Curriculum Change: A National Concern

Mosenthal (1982) proposed that models of learning (and failure) could never be specified fully. But they will also depend on the value placed by society on teaching, which in turn will affect the type of people who become teachers, and the training they are given to prepare them for teaching. If good teaching is extended to include planning as well as implementing the curriculum, then account must also be taken of what models are available for determining the curriculum. Since the school functions as a single organization, and its ability to function depends on keeping dissonance and conflict within reasonable bounds, an overall determinant of the character of the curriculum is the way in which accommodation is reached between technology, the social system, and theory (Reid, 1999). It is important to ask why, and when students fail. Many educators have concluded that students' problems, including academic failure, are not attributable to schools but instead to the broader context of the culture in which they live. Precisely, society, of which schools are a part, is responsible, and to understand children's failure, we must address the larger context of society.

Most likely, a search for the causes of the failure and any resulting intervention will focus on partial specifications of factors most proximal and amendable to change. More than three decades ago, Carroll (1963) suggested that student learning was based on (a) characteristics of the learner, (b) the time devoted to learning and objectives, and (c) the quality of instruction. The final factor, the quality of instruction, has the greatest potential to affect the learning outcomes. Quality of

instruction is influenced by the quality of instructional tools available to teachers and the quality of instructional techniques used to deliver the material (Carroll, 1963). Educators have called for education reform by utilizing the instructional and educational tools and curricular programs backed up by the strongest theoretical support and most reliable empirical research (Kauffman, 1994). In other words, quality instruction should be determined not by what is popular, but by what is tested, evaluated, and proven to be effective for students.

In Thailand, a new EFL curriculum is needed; otherwise, the learning will continue to have little meaning, regardless of where or by whom it is offered. The factors that promote the type of desired learning outcomes may take the form of things that can be objectively studied and described—the explicit theories about metacognition and learning that guide the activities of teachers. The objective is to provide grounds for the development of theories of effective practice to guide the performance of curriculum tasks. To be specific, what needs to be changed to support meaningful learning for Thai students is that new curriculum frameworks develop according to student-centered goals that promote consciousness-raising and independent learning.

A National Curriculum Development Group must be set up for the special aspects of the English curriculum to promote metacognitive skills for students to improve their learning. Due to constraints involved in a radical change to the curriculum, such as budgets, professional expertise, and politics, there are two practical and possible solutions that can be urgently implemented. In the first place, an emphasis

in the new curriculum on the student as an active participant, a collaborator in the construction of knowledge in the classroom, and a contributor to the discourse in the domain of literacy must be considered. Teachers must focus more on issues of learner-centered perspectives. Secondly, national framework documents must provide clear guidance on reading development, instruction, and assessment for teachers to be able to transform the new methodology into classroom practice. English teachers need standards that are specific and they need opportunities for collaborative, professional development to build knowledge for change and to relate new teaching-learning methods to their local contexts.

Attaining these goals is essential if we are to make the curriculum work for all students. What we need to do to accomplish the national education goals depends on a wide range of considerations having to do with meaningful and lifelong learning and how best to promote it: the influence of effective instruction, and language teachers' expertise.

What is Possible/Practical to Do?/ And How?

The observations above reflect and explain the problems of the current English curriculum in Thailand, and the outcomes of the reading instruction in particular. A central educational policy for effective practice rests in the implementation of new methods and programs. There are many factors required to support the curriculum policy changes, namely, textbook policies, cultural, linguistic, intellectual, socioeconomic status diversity, family or

community groups, etc. However, from my analysis of the situation in Thailand for the national committee, the possible and practical ways to promote metacognitive strategies at the primary stage appear to involve setting clear goals for the curriculum policy, creating a practical national professional development program, and guidelines for classroom practice.

Setting Clear Goals

The first step, setting clear goals and standards, requires much thought. Learning standards spell out what students need to learn, and curricula include summaries of the material to be covered. The curriculum policy must provide a solid foundation for content based on the national standards. The main theme of the curriculum policy is that teachers must foster metacognitive strategies for students to support meaningful learning. This policy rests in the concept that reading is more than a solitary, cognitive process. Reading is something one does in groups, led by a teacher. It is a social, interactional activity. As Prescott (2001) points out, learning to read is deeply embedded in the interaction that takes place between teachers and peers in reading groups. How the teacher organizes that reading group, how s/he assigns turns, gives praise, asks questions, and so on, can have a profound effect on –how effectively students learn to read. Similarly, how students conduct themselves in the group in bidding for turns, reading aloud, answering questions, and responding to other students can also, in a very real sense, determine how strategically they learn to read. To help teachers view the language learners as something more complex than cognitive machines, future efforts should focus on developing

students' metacognitive skills. Chamot and Kupper (1989) recommend that teachers provide instruction and practice in metacognition (especially in comprehension monitoring), and identify the distinguishable characteristics of successful learners because their study showed that successful learners used learning strategies more often, more appropriately, and with greater variety, than less successful learners had fewer strategies in their repertoires and used them inappropriately for the tasks at hand (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). To support such meaningful learning, the curriculum component that is to be developed must reflect the following criteria:

■ Focuses on students and their learning: Teaching and learning activities focus on student-generated knowledge and problem-solving processes as identified from the expected learners outcomes.

■ Reflects exemplary practices for teaching and learning: Incorporates best practices to stimulate student interest and literacy, and enhance student achievement.

■ Emphasizes problem-solving activities: Provides experiences based on multiple knowledge sources. Students engage in problem-solving and high-level thinking activities systematically.

Professional Development

In terms of practice, special training in the metacognitive strategies for teachers must be carried out to make sure that teachers possess adequate understanding and expertise of the new instruction methodology. This can be done in the

form of seminars, and teacher training, schoolwide, districtwide, and nationwide. Overall, what teachers should know about the essence of the curriculum is consistent with the suggestions made by Oxford (1993) regarding training teachers to incorporate the following ideas into their teaching strategy:

1. Strategy training should be based on students' attitudes, beliefs, and stated needs.
2. Affective issues in strategy training should be directly addressed.
3. Strategies should be chosen to fit together and support other strategies, and they should be integrated into the curriculum over a long period of time.
4. Strategy training should be explicit, overt, and relevant, and should provide plenty of practice.
5. Learners should help to evaluate the success of the training and the value of the strategies.

Classroom Practice

The curriculum framework must be well planned in order for teachers to transform the standards into classroom practice. The newly constructed curriculum and assessment frameworks need to be specific and responsive to a student-centered perspective. The instruction guidelines or suggested activities that need to bear relation to the national standards. A new curriculum needs to view integrated instruction as a positive alternative that emphasizes the uses of language. The new explicit curriculum frameworks must require students to examine the broad connections of ideas, information, issues,

themes, and perspectives across different genres of readings and writings. The major areas of reading in the curriculum must appear to be "activities" rather than curriculum concepts just to fulfill the objectives of the curriculum. In classroom practice, it is important that schools and teachers strive to provide students with ample opportunities to interact with the texts in meaningful and practical contexts, while at the same time, encouraging them to reflect upon and explore what reading strategies work to accomplish particular tasks. In addition, teachers should regularly read with them using texts of diverse genres and inviting their active participation in textual interaction. Such techniques will enhance students' sense of how readers communicate with writers. With conscious awareness of textual features, students are more likely to develop as strategic and self-regulated readers.

Chamot and Kupper (1989) suggest that teachers explain why the strategy is important, model the strategy, have students practice it immediately in class and again in homework assignments, and have a class discussion about the strategy after students have practiced it. Acquiring new strategies takes time, thus teachers need to continue with strategy instruction until students are using the new strategy independently. Having students reflect on their learning is another way of helping them develop metacognitive strategies (Prescott, 2001).

All in all, no one program will be sufficient for the full range of learners that teachers have. Teachers will need to know multiple instruction methods to be able to support the learners who do not benefit from the core program of

instruction. Thus, the plan must emphasize continual teacher development. Teachers must promote adoption of instruction strategies, course materials, etc., based on what works best for the students as well as support their meaningful learning. To illustrate, the suitable activities, the use of technology, materials, and assessments must be designed to foster metacognitive skills and increase students' essential learning skills. Teachers should incorporate cooperative learning structures, student research projects, and inquiry lessons that require students to seek knowledge from sources other than the textbook or the teacher This will make students feel that they really learn something meaningfully, the ultimate goal of the curriculum policy.

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