

Review Article

Review of English Language Basic Education Core Curriculum: Pedagogical Implications for Thai Primary Level Teachers of English

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 with regard to English as a compulsory subject at the primary school level (Grades 1–6) and considers the pedagogical implications for Thai teachers of English to prepare Thai primary school students for Thailand's membership of the ASEAN community. Drawing upon a document analysis of the learning strands and standards of the Foreign Languages Core Curriculum issued by the Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC), Ministry of Education, this article discusses two key issues—namely, raising English teachers' awareness of English as an international language (EIL) or English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) and equipping primary school students with life-long learning skills for the 21st Century, which may enhance their readiness for participation in ASEAN activities. This critical review attempts to encourage such stakeholders as policy makers, educators, scholars, and parents to recognize key issues related to language planning policies and English language pedagogical implications for preparing Thai primary level teachers of English and primary school students in Thailand for the ASEAN community.

Keywords: English subject, primary education, basic education core curriculum, English as an international language (EIL), ASEAN

บทคัดย่อ

บทความปริทัศน์ฉบับนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะทบทวนหลักสูตรแกนกลางการศึกษาขั้นพื้นฐานปี พุทธศักราช 2551 ในรายวิชาภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะ วิชาบังคับสำหรับระดับประถมศึกษาปีที่ 1–6 และเสนอแนะนัยยะทางการสอนสำหรับครูชาวไทยที่สอนภาษาอังกฤษสำหรับเตรียมความพร้อมนักเรียนไทยในระดับประถมศึกษาสำหรับประชาคมอาเซียน

จากการวิเคราะห์เอกสารเกี่ยวกับสาระและมาตรฐาน การเรียนรู้ของหลักสูตรแกนกลางภาษาต่างประเทศ ซึ่งกำหนดโดยสำนักงานคณะกรรมการการศึกษาขั้น พื้นฐาน (สพฐ.) ของกระทรวงศึกษาฯ บทความฉบับนี้ อกปราชสংประเด็นหลักคือการเพิ่มความตระหนัก ให้กับครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษเกี่ยวกับภาษาอังกฤษใน ฐานะภาษานานาชาติหรือภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษา กลาง และการติดอาڑูทางทักษะเพื่อการเรียนรู้ตลอด ชีวิตในศตวรรษที่ 21 ให้กับนักเรียนก้ามีเพื่อ

ส่งเสริมความพร้อมสำหรับอาชีชน บทความปริทัศน์ ฉบับนี้หวังที่จะกระตุ้นผู้กำหนดนโยบาย นักการศึกษา นักวิชาการ และผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสีย ให้ตระหนักถึงประเด็นสำคัญดังๆ ที่เกิดจากการดำเนินการวางแผนนโยบายภาษาและนัยยะทางการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อเตรียมความพร้อมให้แก่ครูชาวไทยที่สอนภาษาอังกฤษและนักเรียนระดับประถมศึกษาในประเทศไทยสำหรับประชาชนอาชีชน
คำสำคัญ: วิชาภาษาอังกฤษ การศึกษาระดับประถมศึกษา หลักสูตรแกนกลางการศึกษาขั้นพื้นฐาน ภาษาอังกฤษในฐานะภาษานานาชาติ อาชีชน

INTRODUCTION

Primary education is one of the most important foundations for children to gain a better standard of living and welfare once they become adults; language education is thus key to social inclusion, self-expression, and personal development that will help them to achieve lasting positive and rewarding results (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2012). According to Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC, 2008), foreign languages constituting basic learning content that is prescribed for the entire basic education core curriculum consist solely of English, while other foreign languages, such as French, German, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Pali, and languages of neighboring countries are left to individual educational institutions to provide foreign language courses as appropriate. Thai children generally enter Grade 1 at the age of 7 and finish Grade 6 at the age of 12. Some children may, in fact, start learning English at an earlier age. Graddol (2006) points out that the age at which children start learning English has been decreasing around the globe as parents believe that the younger their children learn English, the easier they can acquire the language. In addition, due to the National Education Act 1999, the Thai government recognizes that English proficiency is necessary for

Thai children; as a result, English language teaching is fundamental for Thailand's basic education system (Foley, 2005).

Mackenzie (2008) states that there is an increasing demand for English for Young Learners (EYL) in various Asian contexts as English serves as an important tool for communicating, seeking knowledge, and creating understanding of cultures and visions of the world community; thus, English enables children and young learners to be aware of cultural diversity and global issues. Qiang (2002), for example, argues that there is a change in the basic requirement for primary school English in China, which aims to promote students' interests, self-confidence, and a positive attitude towards learning English; to cultivate their language use and enable good pronunciation and intonation; and to develop their fundamental English abilities for daily use. Based on a survey of Japanese primary school teachers with regard to the goal of English activities, Honna and Takeshita (2005) reveal that English activities should aim at the students acquiring a native English speaker's pronunciation because Japanese teachers of English believe that young Japanese learners will be beneficial for intercultural communication in multilingual and multicultural Japan.

Drawing upon Prapphal (2008), the major reform of the English language curriculum in Thailand was introduced in 1999; thus, according to the new curriculum, English became a compulsory foreign language subject from the first grade. However, the current Basic Education Core Curriculum 2008 with regard to English as a compulsory subject at the primary school level proposed by the OBEC, the Ministry of Education has been relatively underexplored. It is thus significant for Thai educational policy makers and scholars to engage in strategic English language teaching policies and practices in order to be competitive with the trend for primary level English language education in other ASEAN nations.

This article reviews Thailand's Basic Core

Curriculum 2008 of English language as a compulsory subject at a primary education level and to offer pedagogical implications for Thai teachers of English who can potentially prepare young Thai primary school students for ASEAN involvement. This paper is structured as follows. Following the introduction section, the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008) will be presented in terms of its four main strands and standards. The discussion section focuses on two key issues—namely, raising English teachers' awareness of English as an international language (EIL) or English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) and equipping young learners' life-long learning skills for the 21st Century. Recommendations will be made in the conclusion.

BASIC EDUCATION CORE CURRICULUM B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008)

The following sections will present the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008) with regard to its foreign language learning content from which the English language subject is mainly drawn. Document analysis was employed in this article because, according to Prior (2011), government documents are useful resources containing policy and mission statements whose content can be employed as data that provide informative accounts of government goals and objectives. Based on the document analysis of OBEC (2008, pp. 252–253), there are four main strands and standards, which can be summarized as follows.

First of all, language for communication employs “foreign languages for listening, speaking, reading and writing, exchanging data and information, expressing feelings and opinions, interpreting, presenting data, concepts and views on various matters, and creating interpersonal relationships appropriately” (OBEC, 2008, p. 267). Thus, the expected standards are: first, understanding and having the capacity for

interpreting what has been heard and read from various types of media, and ability to express opinions with proper reasoning; second, possessing language communication skills for effective exchange of data and information, and efficient expression of feelings and opinions; and third, presenting data and information, concepts and views on various matters by speaking and writing.

Secondly, language and culture harmonize “foreign languages with the culture of native speakers; relationships, similarities and differences between languages and cultures of native speakers; languages and cultures of native speakers and Thai culture; and appropriate application” (OBEC, 2008, p. 253). Primary school students are trained to appreciate the relationship between the language and culture of native speakers and their capacity for use of language appropriate to occasions and places, as well as similarities and differences between the language and culture of native speakers and Thai speakers, and their capacity for correct and appropriate use of language.

Thirdly, language and its relationship with other learning areas aims to relate foreign languages with other learning areas in order to form the basis for further development, seek knowledge, and broaden learners' world views, which are considered to be the standard primary school students must achieve.

Finally, language and its relationship with the community and the world is one of the standards for primary school students to be able to apply “foreign languages in various situations, both in the classroom and the outside community and in the global society, forming a basic tool for further education, livelihood and exchange of learning with the global society” (OBEC, 2008, p.253).

Based on the document analysis, these four strands and standards are geared toward developing learner's acquisition of a favorable attitude towards foreign languages, the ability to use foreign languages for communicating in various situations, seeking knowledge, engaging in a livelihood, and

pursuing further education at higher levels. Learners will thus have knowledge and understanding of stories and cultural diversity of the world community and will be able to creatively convey Thai concepts and culture to the global society (OBEC, 2008). Upon graduation, as a result, OBEC (2008) expects Grade 3 students to develop their English proficiency by using language for simple usage; thus, basic English grammar and vocabulary are necessary to build up the appropriate foundation for these young learners whose suitable language input is key for the upper primary school level. Grade 6 students should be more exposed to cultural issues and intercultural communication because these young learners grow physically and mentally to become teenagers who develop self confidence and curiosity of the society around them (OBEC, 2008).

Because the ultimate goal of Thailand's Basic Education Core Curriculum is the attainment of national unity, learning standards and goals aim to enable the children and youth to acquire knowledge and skills, favorable attitudes, and morality to serve as a foundation for 'Thai-ness' and universal values (UNESCO, 2011). The Eleventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012–2016) emphasizes the human resource development in every age group by equipping learners with language proficiency of both Thai and English, developing skills for life-long learning, raising their moral and ethical principles, and recognizing rapid changes at national and international levels in terms of economic and socio-cultural impacts, especially from the unification of the ASEAN community in 2015. According to the Proposals for the Second Decade of Education Reform (2009–2018) provided by the Office of the Education Council (2009), one of the measures that aims to promote quality development of education and learning at all levels is to study a widely used foreign language as a second language and those of neighboring ASEAN countries as a third language.

To conclude, the four strands and standards proposed by OBEC (2008) aim to promote a higher quality for primary school students in terms of their English proficiency, a positive attitude towards learning English, and a regional and global citizenship. The following section will discuss how and the extent to which ELT pedagogical implications can be implemented to meet OBEC's (2008) strands and standards.

DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Drawing upon the document analysis of the aforementioned four strands and standards proposed by OBEC (2008), this section discusses two key issues related to pedagogical implications for Thai teachers of English. These issues are raising the awareness of English teachers toward English as an international language (EIL) or English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) and equipping young learners with life-long learning skills for the 21st Century, which will be critically discussed as follows.

First of all, there is an urgent need to raise English teachers' awareness of EIL or ELF, as English is the working language of the ASEAN community. Although EFL has been taught in public schools for decades, Boriboon (2011) argues that English as a foreign language (EFL) paradigm is incompatible with communicative needs in the globalized society, working against English learning, and likely to impede the ongoing national process of education reform; thus, the EIL paradigm is proposed to improve English language teaching in Thailand at all levels of education. Jindapitak and Teo (2011) state that the EIL paradigm can minimize native and non-native speaker dichotomy by raising learners' awareness of English in a global context through critical pedagogy by sharing thoughts regarding the dominance of English in Thailand's socio-cultural, economical, and political aspects.

Alternatively, ELF has been recently

proposed as a more appropriate notion as to how English is perceived in the ASEAN community. A *lingua franca* is traditionally associated with communication between speakers who have different first languages (Baker, 2009). Kirkpatrick (2010) promotes the multilingual model of English language teaching by recognizing the legitimacy of English as the ASEAN *lingua franca*, validating local varieties of English, appreciating local languages, and acknowledging learners to become proficient multilingual speakers. ELT pedagogy that respects learners' individuality and socio-cultural values not only stimulates language learning, but also recognizes linguistic and cultural diversity that leads to better mutual understanding and appreciation among countries (Nguyen, 2011). Sowden (2012a), however, raises practical and theoretical concerns regarding the difficulties both teachers and students in the ASEAN community would encounter by being obliged to embrace and foster a variety of English that is viewed as inferior and by doing so risk undermining their academic self-image and constraining their professional aspirations. Cogo (2012), on the contrary, provides a counterpoint of Sowden (2012a) that ELF aims for pragmatic strategies that non-native speakers can draw on as they collaboratively engage in the communication process. Sowden (2012b) further argues that communication not only includes strategies and process, but it also requires grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

For example, Thai primary school teachers are likely to avoid correcting students' pronunciation errors because they are afraid that their students will be discouraged to speak (Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2009). Nomnian (2012), however, reveals that Thai primary school teachers prefer to teach standard English pronunciation to their young students in order to promote students' effective communication. These teachers, however, face challenges in teaching them pronunciation due to their language learning behaviors, inhibitions, young age, parental dependence, and ethnic and

linguistic differences (Nomnian, 2012). These studies suggest that appropriate training for both teachers' and learners' English proficiency development can potentially enhance positive attitudes toward teaching and learning of English for intercultural communication in this globalized era.

Secondly, it is necessary for teachers not only to develop learners' English proficiency, but they must also train learners in learning strategies and life skills for the 21st Century in order to enhance learner autonomy and develop the learners to be legitimate global citizens. Trilling and Fadel (2009) propose 21st Century skills that every learner must possess as follows: critical thinking and problem-solving skills; creativity and innovation; cross-cultural understanding; collaboration, teamwork, and leadership; communications, information and media literacy, computing and ICT literacy; and career and learning skills. English teachers need to be aware of and acknowledge cultural aspects to learners. Baker (2008) encourages Thai students to explore cultural diversity in teaching materials such as textbooks and compare them with their Thai culture. Corbett (2003) prioritizes the need for a critical, multicultural curriculum that actively educates and facilitates the construction of learners' socio-cultural identities in the process of developing their English language skills, and thus teachers should acknowledge language learners to compare and contrast socio-cultural representations to students' local and familiar cultures, which can lead to a better understanding of cross-cultural issues. Thai students need to recognize their relevant learning areas such as society, economy, and citizenship as they can become more well-rounded individuals.

Watson Todd (2003) suggests that English language teaching not only includes changing learners' attitudes, engendering autonomy, and promoting effective thinking skills, but it also aims to help them become more effective in their learning. Learning strategies have become essential for English language learning as these young learners

have to be equipped with relevant skills to promote life-long learning. Barbeiro (2009), for instance, states the strategies of intercomprehension can enhance primary school students to promote comprehension skills among speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is advisable that the development of intercultural communicative competence is also significant to promote our learners' effective communication. Coperías Aguilar (2009) encourages language learners to develop positive attitudes added to their cultural knowledge that promotes them to become global citizens in a multicultural society.

To sum up, to achieve these two main pedagogical implications stated above, language teachers, educators, and school administrators must first recognize the philosophy and rationale behind these strands and standards, and how and the extent to which they will be implemented. The Ministry of Education is the key driving force to develop our human capital including teachers and students to meet intended international standards by investing in educational research to the advancement of English language teaching, providing sufficient funds for primary schools to allocate sufficient resources for teachers and students, and training Thai teachers of English for the betterment of their teaching skills and professional development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thailand's Basic Core Curriculum 2008 with specific reference to the English language as a compulsory subject at primary education level from Grades 1–6 has been, to a certain extent, attempting to provide fundamental English language requirements for primary school students. In order to achieve these goals, it is important to improve English language teacher education in Thailand by raising their awareness of English as an international language (EIL) or English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) and promote young learners' life-long learning skills

for the 21st Century. OBEC needs to be more sincere and serious in terms of improving both English language teachers and primary school students to gear up future Thais as proficient English language users in the ASEAN community. The Ministry of Education must provide schools with sufficient budget and relevant resources for driving primary education toward international standards. This can be done by investing in educational stakeholders who are willing to functionally develop the expected qualities that primary school students must possess to become life-long learners and legitimate ASEAN citizens in the upcoming year of 2015.

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