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Impact of Americanization on French language education in the Thai educational system

Jariya Heepjantree†, Sumate Noklang*, Jitra Dudsdeemaytha†

Graduate School of Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok 10110, Thailand

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research is to study the impact of Americanization on French language education in the Thai educational system, with a focus on curriculum, instruction, and personnel. Employing a focused ethnographic approach within a critical paradigm, the research utilizes qualitative methods, including documentary analysis, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and both participatory and non-participatory observations. Fifteen French language teachers were selected through gatekeepers and snowball sampling to explore their experiences in adapting teaching practices under the influence of Americanization.

Thematic analysis reveals significant shifts in curriculum design, instructional practices, and the professional experiences of teachers. The findings indicate a marked shift towards English programs at the expense of French, driven by societal perceptions of English as essential for success and modernity. This shift has led to decreased interest and investment in French language education, with teachers facing challenges in balancing institutional policies that prioritize English with the need to maintain effective French instruction. The study's findings align with Foucault's concepts of biopower and discursive practice, illustrating how Thai educational policies regulate linguistic capabilities and influence the adaptation strategies of French language teachers within the power/knowledge paradigm.

The study concludes with a discussion of the broader effects of Americanization on language education in Thailand and offers recommendations to promote linguistic diversity, cultural preservation, and educational equity. Addressing the impact of Americanization is crucial for teachers, policymakers, and stakeholders in navigating the complexities of language teaching management in Thai society.

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: sumaten@g.swu.ac.th (Noklang, S.).
† Co-first author.

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Introduction

Americanization has profoundly shaped global education systems, including Thailand's, where English language proficiency has gained dominance over other languages like French (Malithai et al., 2017). The rise of English, driven by U.S.-based linguistic research, has marginalized the teaching of French as a foreign language. In Thailand, this is particularly evident after educational reforms in 1999 and 2001, which reduced French to an elective subject (Phumirat, 2013). Post-Cold War globalization further entrenched English as the language of modernity, with American cultural and economic influence overshadowing the importance of French (Phornprapha & Podsatiangool, 2023; Riggio, 2021). Policies like the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum prioritize English for national development, contributing to the decline of French (Kitsou, 2016). Foucault's (2012) concept of biopower offers insight into how educational policies promote English, subtly shaping societal norms and diminishing linguistic diversity (Foucault, 2012). Efforts to revive French education continue but struggle against the dominance of American cultural influence (Gobet, 2018). Thailand's challenge is to balance these external pressures with indigenous practices, ensuring a more inclusive, diverse educational system (Draper, 2019).

Literature Review

In analyzing the impact of Americanization on French Language Education in the Thai Educational System, the researcher planned to use various concepts as a framework for the study, which is outlined as follows:

Americanization and Cultural Influence on the Thai Educational System

The post-World War II era marked a significant transformation in Thailand's educational landscape, with Americanization becoming increasingly pervasive. Following the United States' emergence as a global superpower, American culture began to influence various aspects of Thai society, including business, lifestyle, technology, and education (Ross, 2016; Thongaree, 2012). The Cold War further accelerated this trend, facilitating the global flow of information and culture, leading Thailand to adopt American cultural values while distancing itself from its colonial past associated with languages like French (Cammack, 2017). American English, shaped by the United States' capitalist ideology, became synonymous with modernity and development, overtaking other foreign languages, including French, which had historically held importance in Thai education (Kitsou, 2016; Trent, 2007). As part of this cultural shift, the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum heavily emphasized the development of English language skills for global competitiveness (Ministry of Education, 2008). While other regional languages like Chinese, Korean, and Japanese have gained popularity, English remains dominant in both educational and professional contexts (Rajprasit et al, 2022; Sangvanich & Chuppunnarat, 2018). This broader Americanization of Thai education highlights the suppression of linguistic diversity, as English increasingly overshadows French and other foreign languages, reshaping Thailand's educational policies and cultural identity (Bishop et al., 2018; Cohrs, 2018).

French Language Education in Thailand

French language education in Thailand has declined, despite French being globally significant and spoken by over 300 million people and remaining the second most-learned foreign language after English (France Diplomacy, 2019; Seeber & Mampaey, 2022). Introduced during the fifth reign of the Chakri Dynasty as part of Thailand's first educational reform, French was initially taught by native speakers to a select group of students (Lapech, 2017). Over the years, the curriculum evolved, emphasizing listening, speaking, reading, and writing between 1955 and 1960, and later expanding to advanced learning and professional purposes by 1981 (Dejamonchai, 2013a). However, the 1999 National Education Act and the 2001 Basic Education Core Curriculum relegated French to an elective subject, significantly reducing the number of French learners and teachers (Phitphumivithi, 2009). Globalization, with Americanization as a dominant subset, has further entrenched English as the primary foreign language essential for national development, marginalizing French (Cammack, 2017; Draper, 2019; Kitsou, 2016). Despite this, dedicated groups of French teachers continue to uphold high teaching standards through professional associations like the Association of French Teachers of Thailand (2019).

French Language Education in other countries

Globally, many countries have developed policies and initiatives to preserve and promote the French language

in school systems, illustrating a broader commitment to linguistic diversity. In Canada, for instance, the 1969 Official Languages Act mandates French as an official language alongside English (Canadian Heritage, n.d.), creating a bilingual education system. The French Immersion Program has been highly successful, allowing students to learn subjects in French, and fostering bilingualism from an early age (Masson et al., 2021). In the United States, states like Louisiana promote French through dual language programs, supported by organizations such as the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana These programs aim to preserve French heritage in the region and have increased bilingualism in schools (St-Hilaire, 2005). Vietnam's bilingual classes also integrate French into the school curriculum, although challenges remain in transitioning to more learner-centered pedagogical approaches (Normand-Marconnet, 2013). Meanwhile, Morocco has implemented French as a second language across schools, with French serving as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics (Marley, 2005). These initiatives reflect a global effort to maintain French as a prominent language in education, with policies aimed at fostering bilingualism, cross-cultural understanding, and linguistic diversity (Lapech, 2017).

Americanization Incorporating Michel Foucault's (2012) Biopower Concept

Michel Foucault's (2012) concept of biopower provides a critical lens to understand how Americanization shapes Thai language education by subtly governing institutions like schools (Schirato et al., 2012). This governance prioritizes English while marginalizing other languages, such as French (Lemke, 2011). Discursive practices in educational policies, curricula, and teaching materials reinforce the dominance of English, shaping societal norms and educational choices (Phillipson, 2009). In Thailand, policies like the 2008 Basic Education Core Curriculum emphasize English as the key to success (Ministry of Education, 2008), reflecting the impact of Americanization. This focus on American English as a dominant foreign language operates as a form of biopower, subtly controlling knowledge and educational priorities. Evidence from Jindapitak and Boonsuk (2018) shows that Thai English language teaching (ELT) textbooks prioritize English, particularly American style, linguistic standards, and marginalizing local and non-English content. Such discursive practices normalize English as essential for success and modernity, influencing both teachers' methods and students' choices (Bishop et al., 2018). By intertwining biopower and discursive practices, Foucault's (2012) framework reveals how Americanization perpetuates power dynamics that favor English, reshaping the language-learning landscape in Thailand (Foucault, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the critical paradigm and transformative perspective, aiming to critique how Americanization, shapes language policies in Thailand. The critical paradigm, as described by Creswell (2014), challenges the status quo by focusing on issues of power and inequality, making it an appropriate lens for exploring the dominance of English over French in Thai education. The research draws on Foucault's (2012) concept of biopower to understand how language policies function as tools of governance. Biopower refers to the subtle regulation of populations through institutions like schools, where specific forms of knowledge and behavior are privileged (Foucault, 2012). In this study, English is prioritized, reinforcing American cultural dominance and marginalizing the French language. This concept highlights how Americanization is embedded in educational practices, subtly shaping societal norms and language hierarchies. Discursive practices are also central to this analysis, as they represent how language and knowledge are constructed and disseminated within society. These practices contribute to the normalization of English as essential for success and modernity, influencing both societal perceptions and policy decisions. By privileging English, discursive practices reinforce the structures of biopower, perpetuating the marginalization of French in the Thai educational system. The study incorporates an emic perspective, as the researcher—both a participant and observer—engages with the lived experiences of French teachers in modern Thai society (Kajander et al., 2024). This insider viewpoint is crucial for understanding how teachers experience and resist the pressures of Americanization.

The theoretical framework illustrates how Americanization, through biopower and discursive practices, impacts French language education in Modern Thai Society. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the research framework, highlighting the interconnectedness of these concepts as follows.

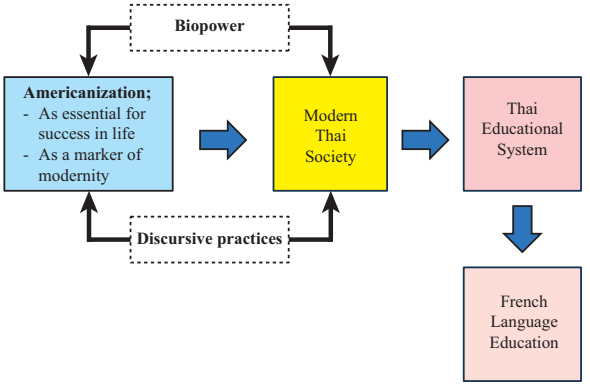


Figure 1 Theoretical framework
Source: Researcher (2024)

Methodology

This qualitative study employs a focused ethnographic approach within a critical paradigm to explore the impact of Americanization on French language education in Thailand. Focused ethnography is ideal for criticizing complex social phenomena through short-term field visits with high-intensity data collection (Elter et al., 2020; Knoblauch, 2005; Wall, 2015). The researcher, an active participant in the French language teaching community, offers an emic perspective, providing insider knowledge into teachers' experiences adapting to Americanization's effects.

This study utilized participatory and non-participatory observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis as data collection methods. The observations were conducted to gain an insider's perspective on the cultural dynamics within the Thai educational system, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how Americanization influences language education. The semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants, all French language teachers, offered detailed insights into their experiences and the impact of Americanization on their professional practices. These interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring specific topics while maintaining consistency in the overarching themes. Additionally, the documentary analysis of 50 relevant documents (Niyomdecha & Noklang, 2023) provided context on five critical areas: the cultural influence of Americanization, the state of French language education in Thailand and other countries, the application of Foucault's (2012) concept of biopower, and the role of French teachers in the Thai education system. This multi-method approach ensured a rich, triangulated data set that illuminated the complex dynamics shaping French language education in the context of Americanization.

The thematic analysis process began with data familiarization, systematically identifying themes related to Americanization, biopower, and discursive practices. Foucault's (2012) concept of biopower was employed to explore how educational systems control populations by shaping language preferences, with discursive practices revealing how power influences knowledge systems (Foucault, 2012; Foucault, 2020).

Triangulation was employed to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings. Document analysis, interviews, and observations provided methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2017). Data triangulation was achieved by gathering insights from diverse educational institutions, provinces, and demographics. Member checking and reflections with co-researchers further enhanced research credibility (Birt et al., 2016). These approaches ensured a robust understanding of the impact of Americanization on French language education in the Thai Educational System.

Participants

Key informants were selected through a combination of gatekeeper recommendations and snowball sampling. Gatekeepers, members of the Association of French Language Teachers in Thailand, provided initial participant recommendations. Through referrals from participants, 15 French language teachers were identified, ensuring they had significant experience with Americanization's effects on education. The selection criteria included: (1) Awards for excellence in French language teaching in Thailand, (2) Participation in specialized training programs in France, (3) Mentorship roles within the Association of French Teachers of Thailand, and (4) Active membership in the association. These informants contributed valuable insights into the challenges posed by the dominance of American English in the educational system. Their perspectives, facilitated through gatekeepers, ensured a comprehensive understanding of the study's focus (Andoh-Arthur, 2019).

Protection of Rights and Research Ethics

In this focused ethnographic research, the researcher considered the potential impacts and risks to all stakeholders. The research design aimed to minimize physical, psychological, and resource-related impacts. Approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Srinakharinwirot University before conducting the research. The research protocol was approved (certificate number: SWUEC-662168)

on January 8, 2024. The researcher adhered to all committee guidelines, and pseudonyms were used for all names in the research findings.

Results

The study reveals the significant impact of Americanization on French language education in Thailand, affecting curriculum design, instructional practices, and the professional experiences of French language teachers.

Impact on Curriculum

This study analyzes how Americanization influences the French language curriculum in the Thai educational system, focusing on changes in curriculum design, the inclusion of English elements, and the subsequent shift in focus. The details of these changes are as follows:

Changes in curriculum design

Americanization has significantly influenced the French language curriculum in Thai education. The predominance of American English as a medium of development and technological advancement, supported by economic dominance and historical factors like post-WWII economic assistance from the United States, has shaped curriculum priorities (Batchelor, 2005). Schools prioritize English programs, particularly English for Specific Purposes (ESP), over French, reflecting a global trend towards English as essential for success. Teacher A noted the yearly increase in English program enrollment despite a shortage of teachers and the reallocation of French teachers to teach both English and French due to diminishing interest in French.

Teacher A, who had a degree in French language education, shared,

> *"The English program enrollment increases yearly, but there aren't enough teachers. Although there are only two French teachers, I've been assigned to teach both English and French."*
>
> (Teacher A., personal communication, January 18, 2024)

Inclusion of English elements and the shift in focus

The shift towards English is also evident in the inclusion of English elements within French language education. Despite efforts to maintain French language instruction, such as starting French clubs or transforming tracks to highlight career opportunities in fields like engineering or medicine, interest in French continues to decline.

Teacher D shared insights on efforts to enhance the French language program:

> *"Schools and French teachers attract students by highlighting career benefits, offering a French club for lower secondary students and transitioning the arts-French track to a French for sciences track, promoting further education opportunities in France in fields like engineering and medicine."*
>
> (Teacher D., personal communication, January 24, 2024)

The emphasis on English proficiency as a marker of modernity and competence reinforces the prioritization of English in the curriculum. Teacher B highlighted the lack of structured learning plans for French, with schools prioritizing English programs or gifted programs where English is the medium of instruction.

Teacher B, who was teaching French in the same school as Teacher A, added,

> *"Capable and dedicated students join the English program, while less capable ones are placed in arts-French. French classrooms have been repurposed, and I manage homeroom and administrative tasks. It's physically and mentally exhausting, especially with unmotivated students and limited support."*
>
> (Teacher B., personal communication, January 20, 2024)

Impact on Instruction

This study examines the effect of Americanization on teaching methods and practices, including pedagogical approaches influenced by Americanization and the use of English in French language instruction and its implications. The details of these effects are as follows:

Pedagogical approaches influenced by Americanization.

Americanization has also impacted teaching methods and practices in French language education. The focus on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has led to pedagogical approaches that emphasize English proficiency for academic and professional success. Teacher K mentioned the establishment of a French for tourism club to attract students with different academic capabilities, offering an alternative to traditional tracks. However, the declining interest in French persists despite these efforts.

In efforts to enhance the French language program in his school, Teacher K stated further:

"A French for tourism club has been established to cater to students who may not excel academically, offering them an alternative to the social studies or arts-mathematics tracks. Despite these efforts, interest in French continues to decline."
(Teacher K., personal communication, January 29, 2024)

Use of English in French language instruction and its implications

The use of English in French language instruction presents challenges. French teachers must adapt their teaching methods to align with institutional policies prioritizing English. Teacher F described the heavy workload and numerous teaching hours, requiring extra lessons to cover challenging topics like vocabulary and verb conjugation. These dynamics illustrate the marginalization of French and the need for teachers to develop strategies that accommodate institutional demands while maintaining the relevance of their language instruction.

Teacher F described the situation at his school:

"Though the school's tourist location draws students to French, we lack teachers. Three French teachers manage three grade levels, each with three classes, including a gifted program. Challenging topics like vocabulary and verb conjugation require extra time, making it hard to cover everything. Teachers offer extra lessons but refuse to cut content."
(Teacher F., personal communication, January 27, 2024)

Impact on Personnel

This study investigates the impact of Americanization on personnel, focusing on professional development and training influenced by Americanization, as well as the attitudes and perceptions of personnel towards the dominance of English and the status of French. The details of these impacts are as follows:

Professional development and training influenced by Americanization

Americanization has affected the professional development and training of teachers and administrative staff. Teachers must navigate an educational environment that increasingly marginalizes non-English languages. Teacher G expressed pride in her role, noting the success of her students in French-related studies and competitions despite the challenges. Efforts to enhance French language programs, such as participation in activities organized by the French Teachers Association, demonstrate the commitment of French teachers to their profession.

Teacher G expressed her pride in her role as a French teacher, stating,

"Despite declining interest in French, I have remained committed, leading to students achieving higher academic success, winning awards, and pursuing French-related studies at university."
(Teacher G., personal communication, January 27, 2024)

Attitudes and perceptions of personnel towards the dominance of English and the status of French

The attitudes and perceptions of personnel towards the dominance of English and the status of French reveal the power dynamics within the educational system. Teacher H shared details of her resignation due to the prioritization of English and science over French, reflecting the challenges faced by French teachers in maintaining effective teaching under these conditions.

Teacher H shared,

"School administrators prioritized English and science over French, arranging an inappropriate teaching schedule, which hindered effective teaching. Despite my passion for teaching French, I resigned after my child graduated."
(Teacher H., personal communication, January 29, 2024)

Teacher I, now a freelance French teacher, described the lack of collaboration with the new management team as a factor in her decision to resign. These experiences highlight the broader sociocultural and political dynamics that shape language education policies and practices in Thailand.

Teacher I, a former high school administrator and French teacher who resigned before retirement, and is now a freelance French teacher, stated,

"I taught French and English for 25 years. When the new management team failed to collaborate effectively, I resigned to focus solely on teaching French at preferred schools."
(Teacher I., personal communication, January 27, 2024)

The impact of Americanization on French language education in Thailand is multifaceted, affecting curriculum design, instructional practices, and the roles of French language teachers. These influences reflect broader cultural and regulatory contexts in which English is prioritized while other languages are marginalized. Despite these challenges, dedicated French teachers continue to strive for excellence, contributing to the advancement of French language education through various initiatives and activities. Understanding these

dynamics provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between globalization, language education, and cultural identity in Thailand.

Discussion

The study reveals the profound impact of Americanization on French language education in Thailand, particularly on curriculum design, instructional practices, and personnel. The curriculum has shifted significantly towards English programs, often marginalizing French, reflecting broader societal perceptions that English proficiency is crucial for academic and professional success (Kramsch, 2014; Wilmot et al., 2024). The growing focus on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as well as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), has contributed to the diminished interest and investment in French language programs (Dejamonchai, 2013b). These findings underscore the role of biopower in shaping language education, where institutional policies subtly govern and prioritize English as a means of reinforcing American cultural dominance (Foucault, 2012).

In terms of instruction, the dominance of English has directly influenced teaching methods, creating challenges for French language teachers who must balance institutional priorities with effective French instruction. Teachers report an increased workload, as they are often required to take on additional responsibilities related to English programs, making it more difficult to maintain the quality of French instruction. Despite these challenges, some teachers remain dedicated to enhancing French language programs, initiating activities such as French clubs and specialized tracks designed to engage students (Association of French Teachers of Thailand, 2019). This resilience reflects both the dedication of individual teachers and their collective resistance to the pressures of Americanization, as described in Foucault's (2012) concept of biopower, which shapes not only policies but also everyday educational practices.

Americanization has also had a significant effect on the professional development and career trajectories of French language teachers in Thailand. Teachers report feeling marginalized due to the growing emphasis on English, which affects their job security and career advancement opportunities. The findings align with existing literature on the power dynamics within the educational system, where English is seen as a marker of modernity and prestige, overshadowing other languages (Jindapitak & Teo, 2011). The marginalization of French reflects broader global trends, but it also highlights the unique challenges faced by French language teachers in Thailand, where American cultural influence is particularly strong (Malithai et al., 2017).

The emic perspective adopted by the researcher, who is both a participant and observer, offers an insider's view into the lived experiences and shared perspectives of French teachers in modern Thai society (Kajander et al., 2024). While the key informants may not explicitly reference the concept of Americanization, they report observable effects such as declining student enrollment, increased focus on English programs, and the gradual marginalization of French in schools. These experiences, when viewed through the lens of Foucault's (2012) biopower, reveal how Americanization subtly governs educational practices, privileging English over other languages like French. This insider perspective is crucial for understanding how teachers negotiate these power dynamics in their daily work, often feeling marginalized in a system that increasingly prioritizes English over French (Rattanadilok Na Phuket, 2016).

In addressing these challenges, policies that promote linguistic diversity are necessary to create a more inclusive academic environment. A balanced approach that integrates French and English into bilingual programs would ensure that students receive a well-rounded linguistic education, fostering both cultural preservation and educational equity (Batchelor, 2005). Additionally, professional development opportunities for French language teachers should be expanded to improve teaching effectiveness and counterbalance the dominance of English. Partnerships with French cultural institutions, as recommended by Phumirat (2013), could help increase interest in French learning and provide further support for French language teachers. Despite the challenges presented by Americanization and the prioritization of English, many French language teachers strive to provide lessons that not only focus on language skills but also incorporate the most up-to-date cultural and social content (Noklang, 2020). They ensure that their teaching includes relevant social norms and ethical considerations, aiming to develop well-rounded, culturally aware students. This integration reflects the teachers' dedication to offering a holistic education that goes beyond linguistic proficiency.

In brief, this study highlights the need for a transformative approach to language education in Thailand. By recognizing the cultural and educational value of French alongside English, policymakers, teachers, and stakeholders can work together to foster linguistic diversity and create a more inclusive educational landscape.

These findings align with previous research on the dominance of English in Thailand, and they underscore the importance of continuing efforts to promote linguistic diversity and preserve cultural heritage (Gobet, 2018; Malithai et al., 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Americanization has marginalized French within Thailand's educational system, with an overwhelming emphasis on English. Dedicated teachers continue to enhance French programs, but without institutional support, the status of French remains precarious. To reverse this trend, policymakers must promote linguistic diversity and provide adequate support for French language education.

To address the challenges posed by the Americanization of French language education in Thailand, policymakers should develop and implement strategies that promote linguistic diversity. Bilingual programs that balance French and English instruction would enhance students' language skills while preserving the cultural significance of French. Additionally, offering more professional development opportunities for French language teachers would improve their pedagogical techniques and help them adapt to the evolving educational landscape. Collaborations with French cultural institutions could also provide valuable resources and increase interest in French language education. These combined efforts will contribute to a more inclusive and diverse educational environment, supporting both English and French language learners.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of Americanization on the linguistic landscape in Thailand, focusing on the sustainability of non-English language programs like French. Studies could investigate the effectiveness of initiatives promoting French language education, such as French clubs and specialized tracks. Additionally, research could examine students' experiences learning French in an environment dominated by English, providing insights into their motivations, challenges, and outcomes. Comparative analyses of other non-English language programs in Thailand might identify common challenges and successful strategies for maintaining linguistic diversity in education.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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