

*Limited English Proficiency of Chiang Mai University Students as Evidence of
English Language Education in Thailand*

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of recent research that investigates the problem and the practice of English language teaching and learning in Thailand. A review of these studies identifies four major causes that contribute to the failure of English language education in Thailand: national identity, teacher development, education system, and exposure opportunities. The focus of the study is the development of English language proficiency among students at Chiang Mai University. Our finding indicates that students show no significant development during English acquisition while at Chiang Mai University. In order to facilitate marked English language improvement, adaptation of new instructional models for practical application in students' lives is recommended.

Keywords: ESL, English Language Education, Thailand, Learning Environment

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Introduction

Thailand is a country of linguistic diversity with 86 languages. There are four major regional languages—Northern Thai, Northeastern Thai, Southern Thai, and Central Thai—and numerous marginal regional languages (Smalley, 1994). Standard Thai, a version of Central Thai, is the national and official language spoken by educated speakers in every part of Thailand; it is used in news broadcasts on radio and television, taught in schools, and described in grammar books and dictionaries (Tingsabadh & Abramson, 1993).

English was introduced to Thailand by missionaries during the reign of King Rama III:1824- 1851 (Darasawang, 2007) exclusively for the court (Baker, 2012; Bennui & Hashim, 2014) with further impetus during the reign of King Rama IV:1651-1861 (Sukamolson, 1998). The importance of teaching English to the public was not commonly recognized until the reign of King Rama V:1868-1910 (Bennui & Hashim, 2014), whose vision of the modernization and progress of the country was through greater English competence of his subjects (Darasawang, 2007).

For over a century, Thailand has gone through several education reforms in order to meet its changing social, political, and economic context. The education reforms have brought about changes in the teaching and learning of English in Thailand accordingly. Throughout this process of English education development, various principles and theories of teaching discovered in Western countries have been adopted to improve the learning process. In 1921, the first National Compulsory Education Act made the English language a compulsory subject for students beyond grade 4. In 1960, there were attempts to replace the traditional methods used in Thai education, rote-memorization and grammar-translation, with the Audio-lingual Method (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2002). A major change was seen in the 2002 National Education Curriculum, which prioritized English education based on four orientations: Communication, Culture, Connection, and Community (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). The orientations of this curriculum signified a shift from teaching English as an academic subject of study to English as a medium of communication (Wongsothorn, Hiranburana, & Chinnawongs, 2002), as well as a shift from traditional teacher-centered to more learner-centered methods (Baker, 2008). This latest trend of communicative instruction presents a strong challenge in that it marks a transition period between the old concept of teaching language for language's sake and teaching language for language use (Dhanasobhon, 2006).

The establishment of the ASEAN community in 2012 and the launch of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 raised concerns about the level of English proficiency in Thailand as English is the working language of ASEAN. In order to prepare the country for the ASEAN community, the Ministry of Education launched a program called “English Speaking Year 2012” in order to encourage the use of English in piloted schools (Deerajviset, 2014; Marukatat, 2012). In the year 2014, the Education Ministry adopted the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR) to set the English language proficiency teaching and learning targets for teachers and students nationally (Prasongporn, 2016).

The increasing role of English in Thai society has set it apart from other foreign languages. At present, English is a mandatory part of the 12-year basic education in

Thailand and is one of the five key subjects tested in the National University Entrance Examination (Bupphanhasamai, 2012). The functions of English in Thailand, however, are mainly for educational and economic purposes. Domains in which English is widely used in Thailand include international business transactions, tourism, the Internet, global advertising, and scientific and technology transfer (Baker, 2012; Foley, 2005).

Assessment of Current Status of English Education in Thailand

Despite 10 years of English instruction, Thai students still have problems studying and using English effectively. In the year 2010, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) ranked Thailand 116th out of 163 countries while the average test score in the 2010 – 2011 O-NET (Ordinary National Educational Test) for English subjects ranged between 20% and 30% (Kaewmala , 2012). According to the 2013 English First (EF), English Proficiency Index (EPI)—an international education company specializing in language training, educational travel, academic-degree programs and cultural exchanges—Thailand ranked 55th out of 60 countries rated, falling into the “Very Low Proficiency” category. In 2015, Thailand fell to 62nd out of 70 nations in English proficiency and was ranked the third-worst country in Asia on Education First’s annual English Proficiency Index. The EF report remarked that Thailand's English proficiency remains low despite a greater percentage of its budget (31.3%) on education than any of the 70 countries it surveyed (Fredrickson, 2012).

Research Evidence

Four major causes have been proposed as contributing factors to the failure of English education in Thailand

1. National Identity and Language Policy

Hice (2015) investigated the English language education of two members of the ASEAN nations, Singapore and Thailand, on the ground of varying proficiency rates of their populations and the national realities of the two nations. Singapore, with the second highest English proficiency rating of the ASEAN Nations, was under the classification of “High Proficiency” whereas Thailand was in the “Very Low Proficiency” category. In terms of identity, Hice maintained that in Thailand English is considered a useful foreign language with Thai being designated as the national language for the sole reason of national security and racial integration. In Singapore, though, English serves as a unifying language for cultural harmony and understanding. A study by Kaur, Young and Kirkpatrick (2013) supported Hice’s findings (2015) that the nationality concept of “Thainess” interferes with the progress of English language in the country’s modernized education system and that English skills could be improved with English being promoted as a second official language rather than a foreign language.

Hayes’s findings (2016), however, have softened the stance by revealing that Thai students have a positive attitude towards learning English as a tool for personal economic advancement, with little indication of negative impact on the status or use of Thai. In fact, Standard Thai is not the native language for most people in Thailand; it is a “learned” language in school. It has a unique status serving as a strong symbol

of identification for the Thai nation “next to the King and along with the Buddhist religion” (Smalley, 1994, p. 14). In this regard, the desire and effort to master English, a foreign language important for the country’s economic and technological development, bears little relevance to the threat of not maintaining Standard Thai for English learners in Thailand.

2. Teacher Development

According to Geringer (2003), the most important factor in student learning progress is qualified teachers who can create the best environment for learning. While it is not necessary for English teachers who are not native speakers of English to have a native-like command of a language in order to teach it well (Canagarajah, 1999), there is a threshold language proficiency level required of a language teacher to carry out different aspects of a lesson in terms of providing good language models, maintaining use of the target language in the classroom, giving correct feedback on learner language, and providing input at an appropriate level of difficulty (Richards J. , 2011). Most Thai English teachers do not speak English well enough or have sufficient English knowledge and instruction skills to guide students effectively in their learning (Biyaem, 1997; Thonginkam, 2003; Kaewmala , 2012). In fact, 65% of primary school teachers who were teaching English had not taken English as their major of their studies, and only around 70% of secondary school English teachers graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English (Noom-Ura, 2013). A survey conducted in 2006 by the University of Cambridge also revealed that 60% of Thai teachers did not have sufficient knowledge for teaching English and only 3% had reasonable fluency (Kaewmala , 2012).

3. Method of Instruction and Educational System

Motivation has long been identified as one of the main factors affecting English language learning (Gardner, 1985). The teaching and learning practices in English-language classes in Thai schools have been criticized as failing to sustain motivation, enthusiasm and commitment to succeed in a learning environment. As a whole, the Thai education system is packed with subjects to memorize and does not allow time for Thai students to think for themselves (Fuller, 2013) or to question anything in class (Mitchell, 2013). For language learning, the teaching styles in Thai classrooms emphasize memorization of rules rather than communication (Thonginkam, 2003). Furthermore, Thai classrooms often use teacher-centered classroom activities, spoon-feeding, and teaching grammar and translation with Thai as the medium of instruction (Noom-Ura, 2013). While *Yes*, *No*, and *OK* are the three most important words for communication, the most typical sentence Thai school pupils learn by heart is: *Good morning, teacher! How are you? I’m fine, thank you, and you?* (Kaewmala , 2012).

4. English Language Exposure

After 8 to 9 years of English lessons, most Thai students are still unable to use English “to do things” (Thonginkam, 2003) due to lack of opportunities to “speak in daily life” (Fredrickson, 2012). Only a small proportion of Thai high school graduates and even university graduates can competently conduct a conversation with a foreigner in English (Kaewmala , 2012) when, in fact, in today’s globalized world, learners have more opportunities to maintain and extend their proficiency in English

through technological innovations than are generally available in the classroom (Richards J. C., 2005). While exposure to out-of-class experiences can provide a pleasurable and positive language use experience, Thai students learning English are deprived of such opportunities. When the method of teaching is predominantly teacher-centered and exam oriented with Thai being the means of explanation, Thai students are given limited exposure to real life learning and also fewer opportunities to involve themselves in hands-on experiences (Pennington, 1999).

Indeed, different approaches to promote extended exposure to English have been introduced. For instance, the Ministry of Education implemented a policy requiring all schools nationwide to stimulate their students and teachers to speak English at least one day a week (Fredrickson, 2012). Also, schools have hired teachers who are native speakers of English and set up international schools and programs (Thonginkam, 2003), as well as introduced innovations such as task-based learning and learner-centeredness in English classrooms (Darasawang & Reinders, 2016). As proposed by Kaur, Young and Kirkpatrick (2013), one of the reasons why the English skills of Thai students are not improving at a sufficient rate despite a wide range of national policies and education reforms is policy implementation. One weakness lies in the centralized education system in which there is a gap between academia and the general public in regards to education reform; that is, there is little cohesion between those who make plans and those who implement the plans. Notably, local teachers have no direct involvement at all. Moreover, linguistic empowerment of local teachers in teaching English would be beneficial for Thai students because it would be easier for students to identify and emulate the skills of teachers of their own nationality and cultural disposition (Nagi, 2012).

Chiang Mai University

Chiang Mai University, the first institution of higher education in Northern Thailand, comprises 21 faculties offering undergraduate and graduate degree programs. To gain admission to the university, high school student applicants need to submit scores of the National Entrance examination, widely known the GAT (General Aptitude Test) and PAT (Professional Aptitude Test). For students in the Northern region, though, they may submit the Northern Quota Entrance Examination. The GAT assesses English skills, and the PAT assesses skills in the subject areas that students intend to study. Once admitted, all students are required to take a minimum of 12 credit hours of fundamental English.

According to Chiang Mai University's Registrar Office, the average score in English of the 5455 students admitted to Chiang Mai University in the academic year 2012 was less than half the 100-point total. Out of a mark of 100, the students' average English score was 30%¹. In addition, the average score in English of the 4927 fourth-year students in the academic year 2015 was less than half the 100-point total. Out of a mark of 100, the students' average English score was still only 30%². Accordingly, the English proficiency of students graduating from Chiang Mai University in 2016 shows no improvement after having fulfilled their requirement of 12 credit hours of English.

¹ Chiang Mai University Registrar's Office (2012): www.reg.cmu.ac.th

² Chiang Mai University Information Technology Service Center (2015): <http://itsc.cmu.ac.th/>

Conclusion

Given the supporting evidence that motivating Thai students to learn English should pose no threat to the notion of “Thainess” and the continuing issuance of varying policies by the Education Ministry for teacher development, it would be warranted to address the problem of limited English proficiency among Chiang Mai University students on issues relevant to learners, such as method of instruction and language exposure, to determine whether the adaptation of new instructional models is needed.

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