Challenges for the Online English Curriculum

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Abstract

Curriculum is a control for any study; it exemplifies the teaching and learning theory including what to teach (content), how to teach (teaching pedagogy), and how to measure the results (evaluation). Online curriculum faces additional challenges both in theoretical implementation of English content and skills and by means of Information Technology.

As English is important in international business, and limited places are available to study it, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) attempted to educate a large number of Thai students from various backgrounds in their B.A. English program. The purpose behind the program is to upgrade Thai students in English language performance. This paper examines (1) the present curriculum and the governing theory of language learning in Thailand; (2) the online B.A. degree in English; (3) the evaluation system; (4) the challenges of advanced technology and new context of learning; (5) the contributing factors in the curriculum to succeed in learning English and to the effective curriculum.

The author proposes that the online English curriculum should focus on basic content and language skills; multi-literacies; learner autonomy; and new technology to facilitate students' learning. Multi-literacies and modality, with care about the possibility in any context, are two keywords for the quality improvement of online curricula.

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Introduction

Online learning in English has become prevalent, and has been developed alongside the progress of advancing technology. It has proven to be successful and enjoyable for incidental learning. But to earn a degree in English, the evaluation and the quality of graduates must be ensured. The curriculum can guide the learning to success as it is a plan and exemplifies the teaching and learning theory, including what to teach (content), how to teach (teaching pedagogy), and how to measure the results (evaluation). Online curricula face additional challenges both in theoretical implementation of English content and skills and technology.

As we are aware that English is important in international business, but there are limited places for those who wish to register to study for the degree. STOU is attempting to educate a large number of Thai students from various backgrounds in their B.A. English program. The purpose, since 2009, has been to upgrade Thai students in their English language performance. In this paper, I would like to focus on (1) the present curriculum and the controlling theory of language learning in Thailand; (2) the online teaching and learning of the STOU B.A. degree in English; (3) the evaluation system and the quality of graduates; (4) the challenges of advanced technology and the new learning context; (5) the ideal curriculum.

1. The present curriculum and the governing theory of language learning in Thailand

The curriculum in B.A. English is under the supervision of the Office of the Higher Education Commission at the Ministry of Education, Thailand who supervises all higher education in Thailand. Typically, any higher degree curriculum consists of the following groups of courses: (1) general education; (2) core courses in major; (3) special courses and (4) one elective course.

General education is aimed at basic knowledge and skills, including 4 fields of knowledge: languages, social sciences, humanities, and science and mathematics. This section covers 30 credits.

Core courses cover fundamental English skills including fundamental literature and linguistics.

Specific courses cover an upper intermediate level of linguistics, literature, translation, English language teaching, English for specific careers, and administration courses related to English for careers such as Accounting, Marketing, and Administration.

Teacher career courses, which is a part and a must for of B.A. in Education or 'Teaching English as a foreign language' focus on teaching practicum, which focus on practices in teaching

Elective courses are general courses in any field of the student's interest.

At present, most of the curricula in English and teaching learning at a B.A. level are based theoretically on communicative English with functional and notional syllabus

design. This means they emphasize the functional language that can be used in real life and in real contexts, and they contain vocabulary related to the topic of learning. Moreover, they are geared toward 'English for specific purposes or careers' to support the need for English, which is now an official language in the ASEAN community. Many tailor-made courses are also initiated with motivating course titles related to local needs; these are provided by various local universities. Translation is also a popular subject as it is needed for today's business, and has become more interesting alongside the technological advance in automatic translation.

Most of the courses in most institutions are taught in the classroom; some institutions provide online learning in supplementary courses. However, there are a number of online courses acknowledged by the Office of the Higher Education Commission.

2. The online teaching and learning of the STOU B.A. degree in English

As a leading university in distance learning mode, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) requested that the School of Liberal Arts should offer a B.A. in English via distance learning; it uses online learning as an approach to contact students, and provides student-peer and student-teacher interaction. The content of the course, online learning system, and challenges will be explored as follows.

2.1 The content of the course

The B.A. (English) program consists of 138 credit hours with 30 credits for General Education; 24 credits for 4 core courses; 78 credits for 13 specific courses; and 6 credits for an elective course. Note that one course consists of 6 credits. Details are as follows:

Core courses consist of Interaction or Effective Communication, English Grammar in Use, and Reading I and Writing I.

Specific courses consist of 11 compulsory courses (English for Office Staff; Self-study Skills for English Language Learning; Introduction to English Linguistics, Inter-cultural Communication; English Reading II, Principles of English Translation; Translation Skills in English; English Pronunciation, English Writing II, Effective Presentations in English, Professional Experience in English) and two from selected courses (English for Business; English for Tourism; English for Hotel Personnel; English for Computer Users; English for Health Personnel; English for Technicians; English for Agriculture; English for Professions in the ASEAN Community; English for Lawyers).

The **Elective course** can be selected from a variety of courses of all majors in the university (except some special practicum).

As we can see, the focus is on basic language skills; cultural knowledge and linguistics are supporting tools in understanding language. Also translation and English for specific purposes or careers are included.

2.2 Online learning system for B.A. English

The B.A. English program at STOU is theoretically based on a distance learning philosophy. There is no physical classroom, but virtual where students can interact with peers and teachers. Learner autonomy is thus a vital issue and a qualification must for students. The means to achieve English performance is through online learning and learner autonomy.

Courses focus on task accomplishment. Careful scaffolding of learning via LIVE CHAT, web board or email are provided through tasks. Students can contact teachers via LIVE CHAT, web board, email, telephone, in person, or via snail mail.

The four skills can be examined as follows. **Listening and speaking skills** are taught in courses where students have to study on their own and submit their work online. One of the special tasks is to submit a video clip of their own presentation in English, which has proved to be successful though difficult, but was challenging for many students when first initiated. These skills are a huge challenge. The listening is not so much of a problem. Students can learn online; they can listen to assigned tasks and check the answers with a key. For speaking, at the moment with '14222 Effective Presentations in English', in which students have to submit a video clip of their presentation, the real speaking of the real person can be assessed. For this course, students have to submit an outline and the presentation materials earlier and discuss with the instructors online or they can call have talk in persons. However, this is rehearsed speech. Spontaneous speech will have to be encouraged such as in Skype, or via video chat. However, with a number of students scoring as high as 400 in "Effective Presentations courses and with limited staff, it is still unmanageable to conduct individual interaction via such technology.

Reading and Writing skills: for these skills, online learning can be effective with good feedback for the tasks they are doing. However, the question of trust is present. Students must really perform their own tasks. The system is mostly based on the honor system.

Grammar and culture: these courses can be effective with good feedback as well.

Extra learning on one's own: enthusiastic students can always learn on their own via the multiple online resources provided by the university.

2.3 Challenges to online learning at present

Students are from a variety of backgrounds in English and IT: STOU students in this program are from a variety of English backgrounds; we are open for admission and provide opportunities for those who need and want to learn English as a degree, but cannot get access in the 'closed university' with limited admission. The teaching has to be catered for different levels of English and different learning styles. Some may already hold a bachelor degree or even a PhD; some have spent some time abroad, or use English as a mother tongue; some want to refresh their English; some need the degree in English for their jobs. This variety of backgrounds in English makes a very challenging class for any teacher.

The '**Learner autonomy challenge**': As in any distance learning system, students have to take care of their own learning, which is facilitated by teachers and the university. Many students in Thailand are familiar with the spoon-feeding system, so they have to learn how to be autonomous and responsible for their own learning. The university provides orientation and consultation. But during the process of learning, students have to learn to be familiar with relying on themselves with guidance from teachers. However, this is a huge workload for limited staff.

The '**Technological challenge**': Even though nowadays the young generations have mobile phones and access to technology, some do not have such access, and they have a hard time learning and following online. Even though we emphasize that all students registering for this program must be able to use computers and get access for online learning, the problems persist and the workload is on the teachers. In this connection, the university has its own challenge of providing a learning management system appropriate for students. At present, Moodle and another local system of *D4L+P* is used. The university has to manage the system that is both student and teacher friendly. The solution is thus to improve learning technology to narrow the distance between students and teachers and to promote learner autonomy. This may be simple to say, but it depends on the Internet and the computer's ability. So training must be provided for new students, and this involves a number of staff.

The '**Team Learning Challenge**': For some courses, students have to work in groups to accomplish some tasks. This is a challenge for students at distance but close via technology. The purpose of this is 1) to provide interaction between students, and 2) team learning; as parts of the overall objectives for higher education.

The '**Interaction in learning and using English challenge**':

One of the major challenges is the interaction with other people, so that students can use and practice English. Students must be able to use English in real life, which is the utmost purpose and aim for the curriculum design. The team learning in peer groups is one of the strategies to enable students to communicate in English. This may be limited with some only interacting with peers who learn on the same course, but in fact when encouraged students have found opportunities to use English whenever they have the chance. This depends on learner autonomy. For example, they can talk to their family or even talk to themselves in the mirror. In distance learning, one has to be autonomous at a high level.

The '**Plagiarism avoidance challenge**': Students' identities are recognized through student number and photo. Sometimes students and teachers meet in person, but since the number of students is very high (up to 1,000 per semester and only 5 teachers), the honor and trust system is depended upon. The submitted work students have to do themselves in their own words. Teachers check for plagiarism through information sources. In the process of learning however, only some plagiarism from information sources can be detected. Students have to learn how to cite all information. Most of all, students must be aware that the learning is for themselves to be able to develop their English performance; that is, they should not study only for marks or the degree.

The '**Administration challenge**': Since online learning can take a huge number of students, the appropriate number of teachers is a must. Research should be

encouraged to evaluate the relation between effective teaching and the number of teachers or facilitators.

3. Evaluation system and the quality of graduates

The genuine evaluation is language use in real life; this is a challenge to all course design. How can we prepare students to achieve those objectives? For evaluation in the system we have two kinds: formative and summative. The present examination system is based on formative and summative evaluation. Formative evaluation includes tasks to be finished during the semester and summative evaluation includes final examination both in multiple–choice, objective, and subjective tests.

For formative evaluation, we can exploit much of the technology for language use, such as submitting a video clip or submitting a report. For summative evaluation, or the final exam, it is still not possible to have students perform live presentation. The final exam is still in an objective form with paper and pencil test. This is a limitation for the evaluation. One of the processes in online learning and distance learning is that students have to monitor and evaluate themselves with clear guidelines. They monitor their own learning with the teachers or tutors as facilitators.

For summative evaluation, to decide and pinpoint which level of ability and performance a student has in English, exams are in both objective and subjective forms such as in the writing courses. However, we have a limitation in the 'Effective Presentations in English' course, that only the objective test can be assessed.

The quality of subjective marking depends on the number of staff. For example, translation skill courses require attentive marking; with a limitation of staff, this can be at its perfect quality, but only with the expense of time and devotion of the teachers.

The overall performance of students in English must also be standardized; this can be done with students taking standardized tests.

4. The challenges of advanced technology and new learning context

Jennifer Rowsell (2016), from Brock University in Canada, in her paper *That was then, This is now: Reimaging Literacy in Multimodal Times* presented in the 51st RELC (Regional English Language Center) Seminar in Singapore, proposed the following concepts of learning in a new environment: Local-global learning, transdisciplinarity, multimodality and complexity of communication, still need fundamental literacy skills/practice/competences. It is worth looking into some details.

Local-global learning means the learning of language must be for international use, while functioning at a local level and suitable for local situations; transdisciplinary means the learning involves many inter-connected disciplines; one cannot just study language in isolation. Multimodality and complexity of communication are the most vivid examples of how language should be taught and learned.

Multimodality means the meaning is determined with various expressions and communication such as an infographic video clip. In this modern world, the learning has to be adapted. In the old days, the learning was, and still is in some cases, in a linear approach to literary learning (then). But now the learning has to be 'A hybrid approach to literacy learning (now)'. That is, the listening, speaking, reading and writing may occur at the same time. For example, watching and listening to news from the mobile and reading the scripts, then typing or texting the comments. Students must use integrated skills. So the teaching and learning of languages must take this into consideration.

However, in this seminar [51st RELC (Regional English Language Center)], teachers are concerned with how to help low progress learners to develop multiliteracies when they are already challenged in the traditional literacy. This practical concern emphasized the problems from the learner's situation, where even in traditional education, they still suffer. If we encourage multiliteracies, will that be appropriate? The panelists see these issues as how teachers teach and make use of media. Multiliteracies is inevitable. But we have to be concerned with some students who cannot access the media. In current learning, digital literacy must be developed at the same time as other self-development.

Thus in improving the curriculum one must be concerned with new learning contexts and new media in transmitting knowledge and learning. This concept is in line with Kristen Michelson (2016), of the University of Oklahoma in the United States. In her paper *Agency and Meaning Design in a Multiliteracies-based Global Simulation Classroom*, she proposed that since multiliteracies emphasized the variety of language use, which is presented in an individual's social status and culture and discourse format. However, major trends in foreign language learning focus on conventional forms and genre. Kristen Michelson proposed the learner's social sameness and own objectives. She proposed a curriculum based on multiliteracies teaching by the New London Group (1996) and the Global Simulation framework of intermediate French: that is to give students an adopted identity and work on authentic tasks.

5. Contributing factors in the curriculum to succeed in learning English and to establish the effective curriculum

According to the government and the Office of Higher Education Commission, curricula must be improved every five years. The information to be included in the informed decision making in improvement includes the results of the students' learning and administration issues. The contributing factors in the curriculum to succeed in learning English and to the effective curriculum includes the IT and multiliteracies.

5.1 The curriculum design for B.A. (English) at STOU: language content VS teaching and learning approach with IT

The ideal curriculum for online English should focus not only on content, but also on how to teach and learn in a new advanced technology context. It should allow a variety of learning approaches for each student to employ in his or her own learning style. Also, the evaluation system must be effective to ensure the quality of graduates.

The language content should provide basic language skills and linguistics with culture as the underlining factor. English for specific careers and translation courses can be promoted as interesting options for enthusiastic students. Jennifer Rowsell (2016) argues that we learn in linear fashion as in from listening to speaking, from reading to writing. This issue brings up the question of the order of courses. Not just in terms of pre-requisites but also the overall skills requirement that happens at the same time. How should we arrange a curriculum and design courses to accomplish this? We can see now there is more integration of listening and speaking, reading and writing. The improvement of STOU B.A. English must take this into consideration when revising any courses. They may have to be merged.

The learning system is based on learner autonomy and distance learning context. The curriculum must not only include what to teach and learn but how to teach and learn. The distance between students and teachers must be narrowed down and learner autonomy promoted. Skype programs are useful but may not be possible with too many students.

The evaluation system must be of high quality to measure what it is supposed to measure. The outcome or product of learning may be compared to standardized and well-thought-out levels such as the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language). The CEFR has allocated students into the levels from basic to native like: A1 A2, B1 B2, and C1, C2. These levels can be applied.

All in all, multiliteracies should also be introduced and should be the basis of all courses. For example, in a reading course, one cannot read the alphabet alone; one has to read infographics, photos, etc. In a writing course, one has to learn to interconnected reading and writing. For a listening and speaking course, the skills are integrated intensively.

All of these lie in the detail in designing each course. They should be flexible, and have the facility to be adapted to changes effectively and in time for technology advances.

Students should also be able to take courses in IT to support their learning technology knowledge.

Administration issues

This issue concerns IT and staff provision. The learning management system must be effective and student-friendly. Training must be provided. In terms of the number of staff, it must be commensurate to the number of students. Research must be done to see the appropriate number of students. The role of teachers or facilitators in providing content, giving feedback and testing is vital to the success of any curriculum.

5.2 Multiliteracies challenges as new context of learning

As stated earlier (item 4, page 8), the concept of multiliteracies should earn a section of its own. These concepts must be applied in the B.A. (English) at STOU in all courses, since learning English by distance must be supported with interaction

through new technology. Kristen Michelson (2016) proposed a curriculum based on multiliteracies teaching by the New London Group (1996) and the Global Simulation framework of intermediate French: that is to give students an adopted identity and work on authentic tasks.

She also proposed a very dynamic concept of multiliteracies, which includes multimodal resources, multiple ways and means for meaning making, and the multitude of backgrounds and social histories of learners, in the following details:

Design of learning course includes linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and audio; these factors must be redesigned for multiliteracies.

Design of apt resources must be selected by learners, teachers, and designers to be relevant in meaning to culture and what already exists in learners, history, contexts and what learners have been learning all their lives.

Agency means sign-makers, which is semiotic work. When language users use language in the system, they transform the system at the same time; as she quoted from van Lier (2008): the way of being in the world, involves initiative or self-regulation by the learner or group.

Thus, in considering a curriculum, one must be aware of Global Simulation [character, context, creativity – small (discourse) community clearly identifiable role, resources, goal-oriented storyline or project].

The following demonstration by Kristen Michelson on some examples in Multiliteracies Pedagogy on writing genres can be applied to the course. It includes the following details

Genres: written/personal – letter, blog, scrapbook, business letter
Spoken—conversation, monologue
Printed/published—letter to the editor, fiction, encyclopedia
- Primary-secondary
- Private life-public life
- Narrative--expository
The four curricular components
- Transformed practice, situated practice, critical framing, overt instruction

She also proposed 'The four curricula components', which have to be taken into consideration.

Transformed Practice: composing, constructing, designing, and demonstrating
Situated Practice: describing, exploring, observing, and connecting
Critical Framing: comparing, synthesizing, critiquing, and understanding
Overt Instruction: classifying, extrapolating, hypothesizing, and generalizing

These are useful concepts that need to be explored in details when improving a curriculum.

Thus, the following ideal curriculum design from Kristen's point of view should be kept in mind when revising the B.A. (English) at STOU curriculum.

The curriculum design is concerned with global simulation (establish of discourse communities and identities), genre-based curriculum (different takes on LC2 discourses through a progression from primary to secondary discourse genres), four curriculum components (framework for engaging with texts from various angles), and available designs (lens for evaluating meaning making practices).

Multiliteracies and modality in real life: textbooks still included

In the panel discussion at the 51st RELC conference, the speakers supported the idea that curriculum design contributes to the teaching of literacy, and is a guide toward the expected outcome. We must bear in mind the future, what exists at present that can be utilized, and creativity.

The function of textbooks is still necessary despite the modalities of various media. They are important and necessary; they have been designed carefully, developed through time, and well thought out. James Martin (2016), of the University of Sydney in Australia, in his workshop demonstrated how carefully the texts were constructed before they meet the teachers and students' eyes. The teachers must learn how to exploit textbooks effectively.

In the light of this concept, B.A, English curriculum improvement should focus on multi literacies, that is, to focus more on global simulation, and be genre based. As to the design of the course, the curriculum should engage texts from various angles and sources in each detailed specific course.

Conclusions

Considering the structure and content of the present curriculum of STOU B.A. English and its implementation, the improvement lies in the teaching process that is concerned with advanced technology, multiliteracies, and new contexts in learning such as modalities. Students must be encouraged to be autonomous and skillful in IT. However, we cannot ignore the use of textbooks, which are carefully thought out and the appropriate adaptation to one's context.

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