Issues in the Teaching of English: Thai Experience[1]

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Introduction

Recently, there have been a number of changes in the teaching and learning of English in Thailand. These changes have resulted from 3 factors which are: advances in information and communication technology in the Age of Globalization, the National Education Act of 1999, and the Ministry of University Affairs' New English Curriculum. In this paper, each factor will be examined respectively

1) Advances in Information and Communication Technology in the Age of Globalization

The first factor is the Age of Globalization. Since the last decade of the 20th century, "globalization" has been felt as a wind of change that has impacted on everything as it swept across the world. Its effects have been unimaginable and so fast that those who cannot catch up with it will lag behind in the increasingly competitive world. In this globalized situation, the world's citizens today have experienced the fast flow of information in a degree that people living ten years ago never dreamed of. People in this globalization era have witnessed the world in which knowledge, information and communication have been transferred and exchanged back and forth from different corners of the world in a dramatically rapid speed. This is due chiefly to the advances in information and communication technology made to make life easier. Education is one sector that benefits from these innovations. The distance mode of education made possible in the past by traditional audiovisual technology has been improved by these new advances to the extent that much more people can be served and the word 'distance' is not limited. This creates a situation in which education becomes borderless education

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that can go far beyond any geographical, political, or cultural frontiers. Educational programs are now conducted in an environment that teacher and learners do not need to be present face-to-face, but instead they can interact in the virtual classroom. The English language, which was in the past considered a "second" or "foreign" language now holds a status of a world or an international language. Those who have little or no knowledge of English will suffer in transferring and obtaining knowledge and information in this information community, so there is a strong demand to equip everybody with the communicative proficiency in the English language. This consequently increases the importance of English language education throughout the world. Thailand in this case is no exception. With this facing force of change, the existing pedagogy must be geared towards more communicative competence. This is how the globalization and the borderless education have necessitated changes in English language education.

In response to the increasing demand of quality language education, advances in information and communication technology have also facilitated the teaching and learning of English to the degree that the virtual classroom and borderless education can be achieved. The Internet, emails, chatrooms, webboards, and teleconferencing have called for the need to revise and adjust the way teachers teach, the way students learn, the printed materials and classroom activities to suit learning and teaching in the new era.

One example is the Borderless Education Project at Suranaree University of Technology (SUT). SUT announced a policy of regular and distance education programs through state-of-the-art information and communication technology to provide science and technology education to as many people in Thailand as possible. The objectives of the projects are to develop the university instructional media and communication, multimedia course materials and self-learning instructional systems. The development has been done through multimedia course materials, a multimedia production house and an instruction media bank with interactive and computer media as the principle media, and borderless education operations in the form of a virtual university.

The project began in 1998 and in 2002, 24 courses were in production. In 2003, the courses should number 45. At present, 5 English language courses are being developed for use by 2004 with students at IT campuses in Udonthani, and Buriram provinces. The staff members at the School of English are working hard to adjust existing practice in terms of teaching methodology, teaching materials, as well as attitudes, to suit the new requirements of borderless education.

2) The National Education Act of 1999

The second factor is the National Education Act of 1999. This Act comes out as a result of the economic, political, cultural and social crisis that has engulfed Thailand and the Southeast Asian region recently. This Act also enjoys the status of the national education reform act due to a number of reforming issues stated in it. The Act is divided into 9 chapters according to the educational issues that need to be reformed. Among those are educational administration and management, educational standards and quality

assurance, and technologies for education. The Act aims at the full development of the Thai people in all aspects: physical and mental health; intellect; knowledge; morality; integrity; and a desirable way of life so as to be able to live in harmony with other people and bring about the sustainable development of the country. Certainly, these elements play a role in adjusting the existing practice in the learning and teaching of English in the country. Particular examples are of a learner-centered approach in the language classroom, classroom research in English language instruction, and technology for English language instruction.

The first of these examples is the use of learner-centered approach in language classroom. It is stated in Chapter 4 under the heading of "National Education Guidelines" that there should be a shift from the traditional teacher-centered approach to a freer and less stressful learner-centered approach. It is believed that allowing learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potentiality will bring about a desirable progress in learning. Since its beginning, SUT's English language curriculum has been more or less following this practice. For English foundation courses, three hours of instruction are divided into a 1.5-hour tutorial session and a 1.5-hour computer-assisted instruction (CAI) session. In the computer laboratory class, the students are given time to study different sorts of language activities and tasks provided on the computer at their own speed and according to their ability and preferences. In other words, they are allowed to enjoy their learning independence. The teacher's role is reduced to the role of facilitator rather than the traditional leader of the class. They also have free access to the Internet to explore further whatever they consider relevant to their language improvement. The initial evidence from the students' performance proves the effectiveness of this practice when compared to traditional face-to-face practice.

Our second example is classroom research in English language instruction. Also in Chapter 4, it is required that more emphasis should be placed on classroom research. Teachers should be encouraged to carry out more research for the development of suitable and more efficient learning for learners at different levels of education. This emphasis has been responded into two ways. First, in universities such as Suranaree University of Technology, more funds have been provided as an encouragement for conducting classroom research aiming to direct pedagogical benefits. The other way is seen through the postgraduate course in research methodology in English language studies, in which ideas, principles, and elements of classroom research are focused on as another area of research that plays a significant role in the enhancement of English language education.

The third example is technology for English language education. The last chapter of the Act entitled "Technologies for Education", reserves an indispensable role for the employment of technology in education. The potential of technologies should be maximized to increase students' proficiency. The School of English at SUT is proud to report that it has been in the forefront in optimizing the use of technology in its language teaching and learning. In addition to the use of CAI, a number of technological means, such as teleconferencing and the Internet, has now become common for SUT students in their language learning. Moreover, its pioneering MA and Ph.D. programs in English

Language Studies have incorporated the elements of technology-enhanced language learning into its syllabus. Courses like CALL and Applications of Technology in Language Studies offered by SUT are among innovative programs in the country. The School of English is now considering a joint Ph.D. program in Technology-Enhanced Language Learning with a foreign university to further strengthen its academic base in order to become a strong leader in this specialization.

3) The Ministry of University Affairs' New English Curriculum

Apart from the two factors mentioned which are advances in information and communication technology in the age of globalization and the National Education Act of 1999, the other factor that causes the changes in the teaching and learning English in Thailand is the Ministry of University Affairs' new English curriculum. There have been complaints that students who complete their undergraduate English course cannot effectively use English that they have learned and students from different universities in Thailand have shown inconsistency in their English proficiency. As a result, research on the topic of "English Language Teaching in the General Education Curriculum in Thai Universities" was conducted during the period from June 1999 to February 2000. The research aims to examine: 1) the English proficiency level of Thai students before entering universities, 2) the English teaching approaches of the teachers and the learning strategies of the students, 3) ways to set the English teaching and learning standards in Thai universities. The results of the study indicate that English language skills of Thai students before entering the universities are below average. Students from different or even the same universities show significant differences in terms of English proficiency although their major subjects are the same. This is regarded as a critical situation in the educational system of the country, so it is deemed highly necessary for a new paradigm for teaching and learning English in the country to be carefully devised and implemented.

Responding to this necessity, the Ministry of University Affairs has formed a committee and allocated a budget to support the development of the universal English curriculum which is essential to solve the current problems. The committee comprises of English instructors from different government and private universities. The member of the committee have met many times in Bangkok and conducted a seminar in August 2000 on the topic of "The Reform of the English Language Syllabus in the General Education Curriculum and English Major Curriculum". Ninety-seven instructors who attended the seminar were mostly heads of English Departments and coordinators of English courses in the General Education Curriculum and English major courses. The aim of the seminar was to inform the instructors of the progress of the reform and hear the opinions of the public about the changes. By the end of the seminar, the administrators of the English language programs of both government and private universities reached a consensus, which provides new directions for English language instruction at university level. This consensus was proposed to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of University Affairs for his endorsement of these changes as a policy. Then it was reported to the Committee of the Government University Rectors and now each university is obliged to implement the changes. A period of four year has been set for implementing these changes.

The new directions for teaching and learning English at the university level necessitate a set of changes. First, there should be only one set of English scores that are used to assess the students' ability before entering the university system. It is agreed that the students' English language scores from the English Entrance Examination of the Ministry of University Affairs will be used for this purpose. Also, the scores from the English Entrance Examination will be used to place students in an academic level according to their ability. For weaker students, remedial courses will be provided with no credits. Those with average proficiency will take a compulsory first level course and those with higher proficiency will be put in a compulsory second level course. Then more advanced students can opt to take advanced English courses later, to meet the specified credit requirements. Since the English Entrance Examination is becoming more important, it has to be standardized and thus it was agreed that a percentile rank will be used as the criteria to place the students into the appropriate English courses, ranging from the remedial to English II. Every new university student is required to take at least 4 compulsory English courses, totalling 12 credits, in contrast to the present minimum requirement of 2 courses with 6 credits. In the first two courses, integrated English language skills and study skills are the main focus, the third and fourth courses may be the EAP or the ESP as required by each major. Having completed the 4 courses, every student is required to take the National English Proficiency Test any time before leaving the university. This Proficiency Test does not have the same purpose as the exit examination. The results will show the proficiency level in each skill and will not appear in the students' transcript. The students can use the results for their job applications and for furthering their education.

Conclusion

With these factors affecting everyone involved in the field of teaching and learning English, paradigm changes in English language education and practice are deemed most essential. In Thailand, where the old way of teaching has failed to reach the expected outcome, there has been such a good sign that all parties concerned have joined hands to pay great attention to the problems. Changes at the national level reported above are just some examples of the attempts in the country to improve the instruction of English. The implementation of these new directions has begun but management of the new paradigm still has some way to go.

In spite of the hard work that everybody has to shoulder for managing these changes, the teachers are glad that these factors altogether have set a national agenda to stimulate us to scrutinize the present situation, identifying problems and weaknesses and putting effort into implementing them. The most desirable result would be evidence of improvement in English proficiency of Thai students which will eventually allow them to stand tall in the global community. Although it is said that future events cannot be forecast, the teachers firmly believe that there will be a bright light at the end of the tunnel.