ABSTRACT

Six years of English teaching in Thailand accumulated a number of questions worthy to ponder on. Why can’t the students speak despite years of studying English? Why do Thai students clamor for native English speakers? Why can’t some Thai English teachers teach English in English? As seen in history, it is evident that English played an important role in Thai education from date of its conception to testifying its importance in the country’s economic and technological development. It has been part of the curricula from primary school to the university level and it continues to be an important element. English Language Teaching in Thailand has gone through a lot of transitions just to meet the demands of the fast-changing world. The transitions and reforms are to keep up with the principles and theories of teaching developed in the Western countries. English Language Teaching in Thailand has employed a communicative approach which focuses on teaching English for communication rather than just knowledge about the language. Regardless of all these transformations and innovations, Thailand still lags behind its neighboring countries in terms of English use. Still, there are more aspects to be considered and horizons to be explored to enable Thai students to learn more effectively and cope with global changes. Where do all these lead to? This paper aims to analyze the ELT scenario in Thailand and shed light to the issues that hinder its prosperity in this country.

Keywords: history of English language teaching, English language.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

It all started in the 18th Century when Western traders brought new technological advances as well as new knowledge in Thailand. Sukanolson (cited
in Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011) discussed that Thai elites during those times widely recognized the significance of English as the language of safety and prosperity. The well-offs of the Thai society wanted to maintain their status in the social circle and enjoy the comforts and prestige it brings. Thus, to keep a civil relationship with the foreigners who they perceived as threats or invaders, Thai elites learned English to socialize with them. On the height of the ongoing colonization in Asia, Thailand rulers found it necessary to be protected from foreign invasions. Thus, Thailand signed trade treaties with England and America with the hope of keeping a balance between establishing friendship with other nations while keeping its sovereignty intact.

Similarly, English was also introduced by Protestant missionaries who attempted to introduce religious influence during the reign of King Rama III. However, they were not successful, so they redirected their course in making some contributions in Thai education with the introduction of the first printing press; Thai medical work with the use of the first medical dispensary; and Thai modern technology with the birth of the first Thai newspaper. King Rama III was supportive of these innovations, believing that modernization contributes to winning over global and regional competitors. English, then was informally introduced to Thai society but not treated seriously.

Moreover, the increasing number of Westerners from trading, religions, and colonial agenda created the demand for the English knowledge among higher court officials and administrators. Known for their hospitality, Thais were visited by people from across the globe. This is the same hospitality that attracted foreigners to conduct business here, spread religious beliefs, and even secret plans to invade. Regardless of intentions, foreign visitors came and Thais, specially the royal court cannot shoo them away. So, out of immediate need to entertain and be hospitable, court officials and administrators learned the English language. It was King Rama IV who was the first Thai who communicate both in oral and written English. He had his wives and children educated about the world and English so Christian missionaries and tutors where hired to teach the members of the Royal household. It was then that Anna Leonowens came into the picture. Leonowens served at court until 1867, a period of nearly six years, first as a teacher and later as language secretary for the king. Thus, formally, English was introduced in the Thai Education System with the royal family as the first learners before it was introduced to the commoners.
Another Thai ruler, King Rama V, had a different perspective in terms of embracing Western influence, though. He is an avid believer of preserving Thai cultural identities and was threatened by the Western advances and technology. Despite embracing the English language and maintaining a friendly relationship with English Western tutors, King Rama made it clear that English just to be accepted as a language to interact with the wider world community, no more, no less. However, the importance of English is still appreciated as reflected on the exempting from military service anyone who has completed English Schools’ Standard Two (Darasawang, 2007). English standard was added in the curriculum and examinations. This 6-year program focused on reading, writing, and translation. English Language Teaching was then in full implementation but with certain borderlines to be cautious with since King Rama V’s instruction was clear: learn English to communicate.

Between the periods of 1893-1931 there was an increase of Thais seeking further education in Europe and America. This brought about a growing acceptance of English in Thai society and education. It was in 1921 that King Rama VI announced the Compulsory Education Act of 1921 declaring English a mandatory subject in the national curriculum for students beyond Grade 4 (Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). Before his reign, English is regarded as an academic language in schools. However, with the new declaration, English was treated as an academic language rather than as a means of communication. There were two objectives for this Act: to produce progressive thinkers among Thai learners and to provide the young generations of Thais sufficient knowledge of English to function in an English-speaking classroom (Aksornkul, cited in Methitham & Chamcharatsri, 2011). During this time English was taught and learned using the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) which focused on rote- memorization. Vocabulary and grammar rules are introduced and infused to Thai learners of English and it continued in that manner but not until 1960 when Audio-lingual Method (ALM) was introduced to replace GTM. This was because of the demand of international communication.

Later on, a new English syllabus was introduced in secondary schools which focused on reading aloud with correct pronunciation and comprehension of the text. However, the ALM failed to succeed because rote-memorization worked very well as a method in learning English and it was fossilized in Thai learners mind. After
the World War II, English became the most useful language for international communication. Some private schools started teaching English as early as the first grade. For the first time in history, Thai English teachers taught English brought about by the growing desire to study English among Thai learners. In 1977, the National Scheme of Education was set up to look into the present curriculum which was considered too bookish, academic and teacher-centered. The committee suggested changes intended to encourage practical communication, life-long learning and learner-centeredness (Darasawang, 2007). It was intended that English in the primary and secondary level become more relevant and functional.

The next academic reform happened in 1980 in higher education when students in the university level were required to take six foreign language credits as part of a general education program. It also marked the birth of Communicative Approach (CA) in ELT in Thailand. As this approach prospered in the urban areas where Thai teachers with high English proficiency and native-speaking teachers flocked, ELT in the rural areas remained slow-growing and laidback. Here, at this point, we can say that English Language Teaching is geared towards producing communicatively competent Thai learners.

In 1996, English became mandatory for all primary grades. Now, imploring the new functional-communicative approach, the English language curriculum was focused on developing language proficiency for international communication, acquisition of knowledge, higher education and career prospects. I could say English Language Teaching has gained a permanent status in the Thai Education System.

The most recent reform was part of the 1999 Educational Act and National Education Curriculum in 2002 placing English “at the forefront of national intellectual development” (Methitham, 2014, citing Wongsothorn, 2011). The emphasis lies on practical experience anchored on local community needs. Teaching methods were more on independent work, autonomous learning and self-access putting more weight on communication, culture, connection, and community. There occurred a shift in emphasis from teaching English as an academic subject to English as a medium of instruction. Indeed, English Language Teaching in Thailand has gone through a lot of transformations and transitions in the past centuries.
THE STATUS QUO

At present, English is used as a means of intercultural communication. Thailand, being a member of the ASEAN, has to communicate with its ASEAN neighbors for matters involving business and trade, medicine and health, and education and culture. The economic downturn in 1997 caused a large number of Thai companies to embrace cooperation with regional and international counterparts. Mergers, associations, and takeovers are common and English is used to communicate, negotiate, and execute transactions. (Wiriyachitra, Online, n.d., p. 1) Unfortunately, dealing with Thais is still perceive as a nightmare because of the language barrier. Despite the high proficiency among managerial level Thais, it is still difficult to communicate with the supervisory team and staff. It could be attributed to the poor English proficiency needed for the workplace. Wiriyachitra (Online, n.d., p. 2) said, “English curriculum in Thai universities cannot meet the demands for English used in the workplace”. It can be concluded that English Language Teaching in Thailand has not prepared Thais for the changing world. In fact, the Thai education, as a whole, does not enable Thais to cope with the fast changing world.

In addition, English is also perceived as ‘a lingua franca’ which connects Thailand to the rest of the world. However, Thais should develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes of successful multilingual intercultural communicators. Thus, more than developing knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and phonology, they should also develop pragmatic and intercultural competence.

Moreover, English also enjoys the status of ‘de facto’ second language of Thailand (Baker, 2012). It is widely used as compulsory academic subject in higher education, as a medium of instruction in international education programs, as the language of international organizations and conferences, and the language for international business transactions, tourism, global media and advertising, science and technology, and international law.

In English Language Teaching there is a sad truth that emerged from all these changes in policy and curriculum. It appears that local teachers are passive participants of the whole process. They were forced to follow and made to believe that the Western teaching methods are the best methods to teach English.
Methitham (2014) claimed that these Western prototypical teaching methods that the local teachers have to follow disempowered their instructional judgments and devalue their teaching experience. Thai teachers adopt these teaching methods and materials not realizing that the contexts are different. This resulted to the inferiority among the Thai teachers morale and poor performance among Thai learners.

Furthermore, Dhanasobhon (Online, 2006) wrote a paper discussing the problems ELT has been experiencing in Thailand. He mentioned the issue on the quality and qualifications of native speakers hired to teach English in Thailand. Despite complaints, many educators, school administrators, and parents still believe that there are more advantages than disadvantages having NES in their schools. He also cited the popularity of International Programs (IP), English Programs (EP), Mini-English Programs (MEP) and likes. He explored how costly it can be for the rich and affluent Thais to gain advantage in English. Another problem he tackled is the lack of qualified teachers because English Majors are attracted to the more attractive and better-paying jobs in Airline and Tourism industry. They preferred to work as airhostess or receptionist rather than be a teacher. This problem on shortage of teachers leads to another problem, which is the failure to produce students who are communicative competence. Relatedly, with teachers who lack the competence and the qualifications, it would be difficult to teach students who can communicate in English. The whole idea portrays “the blind leading another blind” scenario. Definitely, you cannot teach what you do not know or you cannot share what you do not have. Again, the issue on unqualified teachers will lead to another issue regarding misconception that teaching communicatively does not need grammar and structure. Because of the advocacy to use CLT in the hope to improve English proficiency, Thai teachers are traumatized to teach grammar and structure, believing that this is not the feature of CLT. Thai teachers had a wrong notion that CLT is all about learning to talk Everyday English and that there is no more need to learn grammar and structure. In their desire to oblige with the demands from the Ministry of Education and the unrealistic expectations from school administrators, parents and the government, the teachers are lost and drowned in the tons of teaching methods or strategies passed on to them, often forgetting the main ingredients in the cake: grammar and structure. Everything else is the icing.
Lastly, the present situation reflects the kind of learners of English Thailand has, passive and reluctant. Active learners are those who keep practicing the language whenever they have a chance. It is quite rare for Thai learners. Oftentimes, students tend to shy away from English-speaking people in fear of embarrassing themselves. They are definitely not that confident with their English skills. Dhanasobhon (Online, 2006) stated that university graduates cannot speak English, a claim he shared with Wiriyachitra who previously remarked that Thai universities did not prepare Thai graduates for English used in the workplace. In conclusion, what has gone wrong in ELT in Thailand?

THE NEED FOR EDUCATION REFORM

Reform is essential to cope with the demands of change. Educational reform is needed to develop learner’s full potential to achieve a quality life and make worthwhile contributions in strengthening the nation. Educational reform in Thailand has been carried out in four areas: school, teacher, curriculum and administration. According to the new National Education Act, education provision is based on lifelong education for all which focuses on the development of knowledge and learning process (Darasawang, 2007). Thus, the major goal of education reform emphasizes the learners. Learners should be allowed to develop themselves according to their own pace and potential. Individual differences should also be taken into consideration. Indeed, Thailand has initiated a number of reforms in its attempt to improve ELT.

In order to change the teaching-learning process in Thai schools, The National Education Act of 1999 stipulated a learner-centered approach that will encourage students to develop critical and creative thinking. The Act brought about changes in ELT by decentralizing syllabus design, adding local components, encouraging thinking skills, focusing on individual needs, adopting various educational approaches, providing language education and encouraging communicative language teaching methods (Darasawang, 2007). The goal of learning foreign languages should be to facilitate communication, education and business because it is important for Thailand to gain economic competitiveness in this period of globalization. Thais need to learn about cultures and countries to broaden their vision. Expectedly, through learning a foreign
language, Thai students will be able to understand their own Thai culture better and be able to represent this culture to the world audience. To achieve these goals, Methitham (2014, p. 26) claimed that Thai learners need to have a control over their learning. Teachers need to liberate students, empower their voices and identities, and enhance their personal and critical development. More than anything else, the basic goal of education reforms in ELT is to produce “thinking” learners who are capable of making decisions more than just speaking English. More than just learning to speak English, Thai learners should be able to speak out their minds, to talk about their own interpretation rather than mimicking conversations from books and videos, and to be able to reason out when situation demands them to. After all, the real test of learner-centered approach is to see students speak, think, and act for themselves outside the classroom--- without the teacher help or intervention.

Lately, there has been a shift in instructions that focuses on project-based learning that enable students to work independently, demonstrating their responsibility in learning by finishing assigned tasks. Teachers assigned projects that are related to local community to integrate local cultural components in education. In this manner, English becomes more meaningful to learners because the focus of communicative language teaching has been widened to using English to communicate in contexts more meaningful and interesting to students rather than just daily communication. ELT should shift to more realistic learning tasks that enable Thais to communicate to the world the richness of their culture, the uniqueness of their identity, and the bounty of their traditions.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Critically analyzing the historical background, it is evident that Thailand had switched from one ELT method to another. When the Thai society embraced GTM in the 18th century, the period produced Thais who were not only fluent with English but who also became scholars who laid the foundation of ELT in Thailand. These same scholars were responsible in educating the academician and educators, who in return, molded the professionals of the era. These professionals became Thailand’s workforce in the late 18th century and early 19th century. I should say GTM worked
well in terms of producing proficient users of English because these Thai professionals were able to establish a society that is open to foreign training. Besides that, they were able to establish foreign relations that catered to business and education.

When ALM replaced GTM, very few profited on it. Although it had developed proficient, almost native-like speakers, Audio Lingual Method is not as effective as Grammar Translation Method. Majority of Thai English learners believed that memorizing the rules and the structure worked well as compared to mimicking. In my own analysis, the kind of English learners that emerged as products of ALM were “robot-like”. English learning using ALM became so “mechanical” that learners were trapped into webs of patterns. When the situation deviates from the pattern they are so used to, Thai learners are lost with responses. They failed to respond. Sad to say, like robots, they produce perfect English sounds but they are not responsible to think especially when caught in a situation that does not follow the norms they learned from the classroom. This, perhaps, is the reason why the next method introduced was more focused on functional-communicative purpose. Thus, the Communicative Approach was given way to cater to the need of national intellectual development.

As the Thai felt the pressure of global competition, they were alarmed with the slow progress they are making in putting Thailand on the map of international community. So few were the contributions made by Thais on the field of science and medicines. A few Thais were acclaimed for being great doctors or scientists. A small number of Thais made names as mathematicians or architects or physicists. Although international popularity requires knowledge and expertise on the scientific, technical, entrepreneurial and other fields, the knowledge and skill in English cannot be disregarded. It is still obvious that English is a requirement to belong to the international circa of intellectuals.

With the significant development of English and English Language Teaching in Thailand, where do all these reforms and developments headed to? Who are to benefit from all these reforms? Since English is the global lingua franca it is vital for Thais to learn it to keep track of the global trends in business, education, and personal developments. Whether English is taught as a subject or as a foreign language, the end goal of language instruction is to produce students who acquire
English better and perform better in the learning environment. In Thailand scenario, improving the learning process does not just involve learner-centeredness but teacher development, too. More than developing Thai English teachers’ proficiency and teaching methodology, they also need to improve their research skills. Local teachers should be empowered in their profession by allowing them the freedom to choose and modify their own teaching approaches, design their own curriculum, make judgments according to their perspectives and experiences. If ELT will not be improved, Thailand will lag behind in the competitive world of business, education, and science and technology. Despite the many obstacles to the development of English Language Teaching in Thailand, it can be assumed that it is heading to a positive direction. Whatever the approach is or no matter what name it is called, whether task-based, project-based or problem-based, it all aims at empowering students’ independent learning which is the foundation of learner-centered approach. As this is being emphasized, the teachers too, should not be neglected. Teachers should also be geared towards academic excellence per se.

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